

Roll for Strength by [midnighteverlark](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Accidental Voyeurism, Aged-Up Character(s), Angst and Fluff and Smut, Byeler - Freeform, Coming Out, Emmett (OC), Endgame byeler, High School, Jealous Will, M/M, Mutual Pining, Period-Typical Homophobia, Pining, Realizations, Role reversal from usual fanon, Secret Relationship, Slow Burn, Will is a Mess, byeler, guest appearances from another character - you'll see, i know not many people care about OCs but I promise this is very byeler-centered, mike is first to the queer scene, season three doesn't exist, the party, they're 17/18 in this, what season three?

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Original Male Character(s), Will Byers

Relationships: Mike Wheeler/Original Male Character(s), Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

Mike has been acting weird lately - making excuses, being evasive, smiling to himself when he thinks no one is looking. And the hickey's are the nail in the coffin. Will knows Mike has a new girlfriend that he hasn't told anyone about, and he's determined to dig up clues about this secret lady-love. Not because he's jealous. Will has moved on from Mike - really. He refuses to spend his whole life pining over someone who's never going to want him. He just wants to find out about this mystery girl, to make sure she's right for Mike and she's treating him well.

But when Mike invites his lab partner from biology along to a party,

Will is a tad distracted from his mission. Because Emmett is pretty clearly gay.

(Spoiler alert: Mike isn't dating a girl.)

(Note: I know not many people care about OCs (and I totally understand), but I promise this is very byeler-centered - it's much more about Mike and Will than it is about Mike's bf, and it is endgame byeler.) (Also: prompt from Tumblr. Thank you, sorry it took like a year oops!)

1. The Lab Partner

It's Friday. TGIF.

In the deafening buzz of the cafeteria, the Party is huddled around their usual table, excitedly planning the party they're going to have at Hop's cabin tonight. El hasn't actually lived there for years, since she moved into the chief's house, but she goes back every once in a while for peace and quiet - and sometimes, like today, she brings the Party. Cozy, secluded, and parent-less, it's the perfect location for all manner of sacred teenage traditions. Namely, swearing, blasting music, underage drinking, laughing too hard and too loud, and generally being irresponsible hooligans. (Hey, they're a bunch of dorks and nerds. A small party in the woods is about as hooligan-y as they get.)

They're all atwitter with plans. Lucas keeps boasting that he's gonna get his hands on a six pack. Dustin cackles at the phrasing and starts teasing him. Max is talking at Will about music, saying that they should bring her boombox to blast. She's asking him about tapes, saying he should bring this or that, saying his name when he doesn't respond. She clicks her fingers in front of his face and he turns.

"What?"

She knocks on his head. "Hello? Will?"

"Stop," he says, warding her off. "Yeah, I'll bring music."

Her expression goes flat with annoyance. "Yes, we established that. The question is, *what* music?"

"Right." He drums his fingers on the table, thinking, doing his best to tune back into the conversation. He's just a little distracted by the fact that Mike has a secret girlfriend that he hasn't deigned to tell Will about.

Yeah. A secret girlfriend. Will is sure of it, now. The evidence is right there on Mike's neck, just barely peeking out from the collar of his shirt. It's a new one. A delicate, fresh red-purple mark that *definitely*

wasn't there yesterday.

Mike has been acting weird lately. Being secretive. It's been nearly a month since Will first started noticing it. First it was vagueries. He would be "busy" with mysterious plans that he didn't bother to explain. He would vanish off the face of the earth for hours, during times when he would normally be at home doing fuck-all. He'd make excuses; be evasive. He would smile to himself for no apparent reason, off in his thoughts, and deny the expression when confronted. Will knew something was up, but the hickeys were the nail in the coffin. They started appearing a couple weeks ago, and Mike has been doing his best to cover them up... but Will noticed. And now, he's sure about it. Mike has been dating someone. Moreover, Mike has been dating someone and *hasn't told Will*.

And frankly, it's irksome.

God knows Mike wouldn't shut up about El, back when they were dating. And Will told Mike all about Samantha, in eighth grade when he tried dating her as a last-ditch attempt to see if maybe he liked girls after all. (Big surprise: he didn't.) And, granted, they aren't in middle school anymore. They aren't kids anymore, they're seventeen. Practically grown adults. Mike isn't *required* to disclose anything about his love life to the Party. But why hide it from Will? They tell each other practically everything. Right?

Will sneaks another peek as Max chatters to him, to check if maybe his eyes were deceiving him, but no. It's still there. A deep, round bruise, only a sliver of it visible over Mike's collar. Undoubtedly left by a pair of soft, gloss-shiny lips. Will wonders who they belong to. He wonders if he knows her, whoever she is - if he's been sharing a classroom with her every day without even knowing it. Then and there, he decides to investigate. Not because he's jealous, but because he wants to see if this girl is right for Mike - if she's good for him. Good to him.

It's no use being jealous - Will knows. He's been through that song-and-dance. And now, more than anything, he's just a little sad. Weary. Not looking forward to going through this again: watching Mike with someone else, seeing his innocent, nervous excitement before dates, seeing him kiss someone else. A girl. Seeing him staring

after her red lips and long hair and skirts, and feeling that hollow, cold feeling in the pit of his belly.

But he's better now - really. He's not the moon-eyed twelve year old that he once was, following at the heels of his best friend with flushed cheeks and a fast-beating heart. He's basically an adult now. He's looking at colleges and developing his art and he has other things to think about. He's moved on. Really. Well, he's mostly moved on. Kind of. He's trying, let's put it that way. What else can he do? Mike is straight and Will refuses to spend his whole life moping over someone that's never going to want him. And he's been doing pretty well, if he does say so himself. He's found a few other guys to pine over from a distance - and he has plans. College. Some big, progressive city, maybe. New York. San Francisco. He's promised himself he'll find someone there, just as soon as he can graduate and get the hell out of this small town with slurs scratched into the bathroom stalls and bullies constantly on the watch. He'll meet some small-town guy with big dreams, just like him. And in the meantime he can keep trying to puzzle out if the mildly arrogant guy from theater is actually flirting with him or if he acts like that with everyone. Mike can have his secret girlfriend. Will doesn't care.

He doesn't.

He *doesn't*.

Except now he does. Because why the hell is Mike keeping it so hush-hush? What is it about her that needs to be kept secret? Who *is* she?

He's determined to find out. For his own sanity, if nothing else. And hey, maybe when he sees Mike with his new girlfriend, he'll get over his best friend once and for all. Maybe that will finally convince him to let it go.

The Party groans and Will tunes back in, lifting his chin from his hand.

"He's chill," Mike is saying, his tone of voice just on the edge of defensive, and Dustin makes a face.

"You could have told us ahead of time," Dustin gripes.

"I did. Just now."

Will leans into the conversation "Wait, what?"

"Mike invited somebody along without telling us, that's all."

Will laser-focuses in on Mike. It can't be that easy, can it? Mike didn't invite his new sweetheart along to the party after weeks of secrecy, did he?

"I just did tell you," Mike repeats. "Anyway, he's fine. He's a pretty chill guy. I bet you'll like him."

Nope. It's a guy. Will sits back in his seat.

Lucas asks, "Who is it?" through a bite of sandwich, and Mike picks at his own food with his head down.

"Just my lab partner from biology. He just moved here like three months ago. Guy could use some friends."

Will turns back to Max. Right. Party. Music. Focus, Will.

Will has been trying to subtly gather information all day, without much success. He kept an eye on Mike during their shared classes, seeing if he would slip up and send a conspiratorial smile towards a girl across the room. He asked about Mike's plans for the weekend, teasingly asking if Mike had a hot date - and was rewarded with only a laugh and an elbow to the ribs. He even went so far as to ask El if she knew who Mike has been seeing lately. She just shrugged and said, "He's been seeing someone?"

Will has no clues. No leads. No information whatsoever, except for a strong hunch and that damn hickey.

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

And now it's the end of the school day, the bell is ringing, and Will is getting a little frustrated.

He catches Mike by his locker, intentionally slamming into him in

greeting. Mike stumbles, flips him off, and then grins.

“Hey.”

“Hey. You’re coming in the carpool, right?”

The Party is heading to the Sinclairs’ house for pre-celebration preparations. Lucas will be driving them in the long-suffering van that he shares with his parents. It’s not exactly a DeLorean, but it runs. And, as a bonus, it fits the whole Party without anyone having to ride in someone else’s lap. But Mike shakes his head, piling textbooks into his locker.

“No, I was actually gonna give Emmett a ride.”

Will blinks. “Emmett?”

“Lab partner. Bio.” Mike’s shoulders twitch, like he was about to shrug but didn’t quite manage the gesture, and Will’s eyes narrow. “I said at lunch. I invited him ‘cause he doesn’t really know anyone and -” Mike trails off with a vague gesture, and Will nods, playing along. “We were gonna just take my mom’s car and meet you guys later.”

“Right. Cool. So, we’ll see you there, then?”

Of course. Because Mike totally needs to “give his lab partner a ride.” They couldn’t possibly have carpooled with the rest of the Party. It’s totally not because he needs an excuse to disappear after school and spend a few hours with Miss Mystery. Okay, Mike. Sure.

Not that it’s completely unheard of to bring someone along to a Party get-together. Every once in a blue moon, someone will invite An Outsider along to something. A friend from outside the group, or a cousin visiting town, or the occasional unfortunate date - *unfortunate* because then they have to survive the Party. So, no, it’s not unheard of. But it is rare. And in this case, Will isn’t buying it for a second. Oh, he believes that Mike invited the guy as a gesture of kindness - but he does *not* need several whole hours just to give somebody a lift.

For a moment, Will considers confronting him then and there. But then Mike is slamming his locker shut and taking the first steps down the hallway, and the moment passes.

“See you there!” Mike calls over his shoulder, and Will makes himself turn away. He’s not going to watch Mike skip off merrily to spend time with his lady-love.

God, this is stupid. He feels like he’s about thirteen again, listening to his best friend gush about the mysterious girl with superpowers and a number for a name. He’s being dumb; maybe he was wrong. Maybe Mike isn’t dating anyone, after all. But the hickeys have been a fairly regular thing, it seems, and Mike doesn’t seem like the type to have a lot of flings...

“Will!”

He looks up when he hears his name, surfacing from his thoughts. Dustin is flagging him down from across the hallway, wading through the crush of humanity with a grin on his face.

“You ready for this? This is gonna be like the best night ever.”

“For sure,” Will agrees, quickly catching Dustin’s contagious enthusiasm. By the time they drift towards the parking lot and meet up with the rest of the Party, sans Mike, Will’s mind is on board games, junk food, music and glow sticks - all essential items to gather before they head to the cabin.

Will leans against the table halfway between the living room and the mini-kitchen, taking tiny sips of beer and hating the bitter taste, but not wanting to admit it. He’s not used to alcohol. He can’t take big swallows without his whole face twisting up comically, and Max and Lucas will never stop giving him shit for it if that happens. So he’s been taking small sips, and interspersing them with bites of the pizza they brought along, and trying not to watch the front door. They’ve been here for an hour already, and Mike is still MIA.

“Okay, fuck, marry, kill,” Dustin is saying, his socked feet swinging where he perches on the back of the sofa. “Sigourney Weaver, Carrie Fisher, and Mia Sara.”

Lucas chews on his pizza, gaze lifted to the ceiling, considering. “Fuck Carrie Fisher - wait, no. *Marry* Carrie Fisher, fuck Sigourney

Weaver... kill Mia Sara.”

They both look at Will for his input, and he rattles off, “Fuck Mia Sara, marry Sigourney Weaver, kill Carrie Fisher,” choosing at random.

Dustin kicks his feet against the back of the sofa. “That was quick.”

“I mean, it seems pretty obvious,” Will deflects, and they both nod along sagely like he said something incredibly wise.

El pipes up from where she’s sitting on the floor, playing a card game with Max. “Why not fuck, marry, and kill all of them and become a rich widow?”

Max rolls her eyes as she sorts through her hand of cards. “You watch way too many soap operas, Ellie.”

Max’s cards fly from her hands in a small explosion of hearts, spades, and queens, and El delicately plucks a tissue from the coffee table, dabbing at her nose as Max flips her off and starts to gather them.

It’s a good party. Lucas managed to snag two six packs of cheap, bitter beer. They picked up pizza on the way here. Dustin has been blowing up a lot of colorful balloons. Without helium they just kind of bop around on the floor, getting underfoot, but the effect is festive nonetheless. Max brought glow sticks and distributed them around the cabin, despite it not being dark yet; she insists that the effect will be great later, when they turn off all the lights and play the horror movies they rented from the new Blockbuster. Music blasts from the boombox, and they have to half-yell to hear each other over the beat - but that’s the great thing about the cabin. No uptight neighbors to complain about the noise. There’s a stack of board games on the table, but except for El and Max playing cards, they haven’t gotten around to the games yet. They’ve been entertaining themselves well enough just with food and music and laughing way too hard at inside jokes. Plus, Mike isn’t here yet, and it would seem rude to start any real activities without him. *And* they’re waiting for the snacks that Mike is supposed to be bringing.

Will can’t help but be a little on edge, waiting. Because he just *knows*

that every minute that passes is another minute Mike spent probably pressed up against a soft pair of breasts, maybe even collecting one more mark on his neck, and - no. Will reminds himself to cut that out. It's no use being jealous. He keeps repeating that to himself. He's not jealous. He's not jealous. There's absolutely no use being jealous of some girl.

And, see, usually he's not. He's well on his way to getting over his childhood best friend. It's just this new girl that threw a wrench in things. It's driving Will up the wall that he doesn't even know her name or what she looks like.

Like hounds picking up on a scent, Will and El both turn towards the front door. There's a low rumble, just now audible over the music. The crunch of gravel and dirt under tires. An engine.

"Mike's here," El announces, and Lucas hoots, "Food!"

The engine cuts, and two car doors slam. That's right; the lab partner. Will forgot he was coming, too. What did Mike say his name was? A-something? E-something?

A few moments later, footsteps *clonk* up the porch. The handle turns and Mike bursts in with his arms full of snacks, hollering out merrily to the Party - and then Will's beer can smacks onto the table much harder than he meant it to, his eyes locked on the boy that follows Mike inside.

He takes in everything in a flash. The platinum bleached-blond hair coiffed back from his forehead, the chipped black polish on his short nails, the black leather jacket, the beat-up band tee, the old ripped jeans, the slim silver piercings glinting at the left corner of his lip and the opposite dark eyebrow, and -

No way. Wait. Shit. Is that a rainbow pin half-hidden under the lapel of his jacket? Is that a *pride* pin, or just a rainbow for aesthetics' sake?

Mike dumps the candy and snacks on the counter and then turns back, going to stand next to The Guy and sweeping an arm at the Party. "Emmett, everyone. Everyone, Emmett."

He's greeted with a scattered collection of *hey* s and he half-lifts one hand in a kind of timid wave. Will, meanwhile, is playing the delicate game of intense-observation-disguised-as-casual-glances.

Mike begins pointing at each person one by one, speaking over the music. "That's Max. El. The guy perched on the back of the couch like a gargoyle is Dustin. Lucas. And this is Will."

At the very last second Will realizes that's him, and does something approximating a smile. The expression must be at least somewhat recognizable, because Emmett flashes him a curve of straight, white teeth in return, and Will has to look down at the wood floor with his heart squeezing in his chest.

When he looks up again, Emmett is shrugging off his jacket, leaving it crumpled on a chair near the door while Mike starts playing host.

"Pizza's in the kitchen, bathroom is over there," Mike says, pointing them out, and then turns to Dustin and Max. "There's still pizza, right?"

"No, we ate it all," Max says, and Mike ignores her as he goes to grab a plate. Emmett follows him, drifting along at Mike's heels - the typical image of somebody at a party where they only know one person. Will's gaze cuts to the other Party members, wondering if they saw the pin too. Searching for critical or hostile expressions. He can't tell if anyone else noticed it or not; Max and El seem pretty neutral, Lucas looks at best passively curious, and Dustin - ever the extrovert of the group - has put on a cheerful face to go introduce himself with a fist bump.

They unpack the snacks that Mike brought, and the party starts for real. They start to mix and mingle, pairs and triads forming and disintegrating. Max challenges Dustin to a game of darts. Dustin accidentally pops one of the balloons and screams, "My child!" swooping down to cradle the remains. Mike and El get into a heated debate, with Lucas playing devil's advocate for each, watching the argument like a tennis match. And Will? Will is observing from a safe distance, gnawing on twizzlers and pretending to watch Max throw darts. He wanders over to the boombox to choose a new tape, keeping half an eye on the newcomer.

He's... well, probably the gayest person Will has ever personally laid eyes on. And, to be fair, maybe that's stereotyping, but come on. Will has never met any other guy who paints his fingernails. And it's not like the guy is *flamboyant* or anything, but there's a slight but definite lilt that sneaks into his inflections every once in a while. And the pin is the kicker. If it's not a pride pin, why hide it under the lapel of his jacket?

And all at once, Will turns and notices Emmett in the kitchen, by himself, perusing the snack selection.

Okay, new plan: abort Operation Find Mike's Secret Girlfriend. Initiate Operation Talk to the Cute Possibly-Queer Guy. Will can do this. He can do this. He's gonna do it.

He's not gonna do it. Nope, turning around, gonna talk to Lucas -

Okay, no, yeah, he's gonna do it. To the kitchen. Walking into the kitchen, just taking a look at these snacks here, oh, hello, are these pretzels? Just gonna grab some pretzels, and...

"Hey."

Will drops his pretzel. It lands on the floor and he dives to get it, reconsiders halfway through the motion, stands up, realizes he shouldn't leave it on the floor, stoops *again* and straightens with his face about as red as a midsummer garden tomato.

"Hey, uh -"

Name. Name. He forgot the goddamn name. He knew it three seconds ago, *what is it* ? Shit, shit, say something, say *anything*.

"Elliot, right?"

"Emmett," he corrects amiably, and Will internally cringes. That's strike one.

"Emmett, sorry. Uh, I'm Will."

"So I've heard." Emmett leans against the corner of the counter, bouncing a small handful of starbursts in one palm.

Will tilts his head. "Oh?"

"Yeah, Mike has mentioned you like once or twice... per day." He laughs, showing that curve of teeth again, and this time Will notices that one of them is just slightly crooked. Emmett's hand flicks, drawing a line between Will and where Mike is standing on the other side of the living room. "How long have you two been friends?"

"Since kindergarten," Will half-mumbles, and then rushes to change the course of the conversation. He'd rather not go down that train of thought right now. Casting around for a change of topic, he eventually glances down to Emmett's shirt. "You like Tears for Fears?" He does his best to keep the contempt out of his voice.

"Oh, yeah. I wish I'd gotten to see them tour when they came through Washington a couple years ago."

"Yeah, they're pretty good."

Internally, Will crumples in on himself. He can't believe he just said that. Distractedly, he pops the pretzel into his mouth, realizing too late that it's the one he just dropped. Now he looks like the weird guy who eats stuff off the floor. He can't spit it out now, can he? Okay, shit, just chew and swallow and hope he didn't notice.

"So, you're from Washington?"

"Seattle. Well, technically Kent. It's just south of Seattle. But it's just like half an hour from Pike's Place and all that, so we basically live in the city. Lived. Anyway, Seattle just sounds more impressive. If you go around saying, *oh, yeah, I'm from Kent*, no one gives a crap. Seattle sounds like you're going places."

Will laughs along, then gestures at himself. "Hey, at least it's better than Hawkins."

"You were born here?"

"And never escaped." Will arranges his pretzels on his palm, just for something to do with his hands. Grains of salt stick to his skin here and there. "I'll go somewhere else for college, though."

“So what are you gonna do? Once you do escape.”

“Art,” Will answers immediately. And then, trying just a little too hard to be casual, “I’m an artist.”

“That’s cool.” Emmett sounds genuine, and Will stands up just a little straighter. “I’m kind of a musician, myself. I was in a band, back howell, back in Washington. That was pretty fun.”

“Oh, what do you play?”

Will is immediately picturing Marty McFly, onstage with his Gibson, and sure enough Emmett answers, “Guitar. Acoustic and electric.”

Will takes a risk, summoning up what he hopes is a coy smile, and says, “Well, you’re definitely much cooler than me, then.”

And Emmett laughs, unwrapping a starburst. And pops it in his mouth. And *blushes*.

And Will thinks, *holy shit*.

They talk for a little while, with Will eventually hopping up to sit on the counter, and it goes... surprisingly well, actually. Will is slightly less awkward once the initial jitters die down a little, and the conversation begins to flow more naturally. He starts to get a feel for Emmett’s personality. He seems cheerful, upbeat, but maybe a little reserved - or perhaps just awkward around new people. Not at all the Brooding Cool Guy that Will expected upon first seeing him.

Once, Emmett mentions an ex, without mentioning a gender, and it makes Will just bold enough to reach out and touch him lightly on the arm the next time he makes a joke. A brief touch. It’s all that Will has the courage for, just now. He doesn’t really know what to do with himself. He wasn’t trained for this. When was the last time he had a conversation with another gay guy? When was the last time he *flirted* with a guy? Possibly never? He’s convinced he’s doing it all wrong. That he’s being way too subtle, or maybe way too obvious. It culminates when Will says, “Have you seen Aliens before?”

It’s one of the movies they rented to watch tonight - the other being Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2, just for shits and giggles.

Emmett makes a face and laughs, "I actually never saw the first Alien. I'm not big on horror movies."

And Will considers saying it. It's on the tip of his tongue. *Well, if it gets too scary you could always hold my hand...* But he's not quite bold enough, and anyway, there are other people within hearing range. He's about to open his mouth to say something a little more low-key - maybe, *well, if it's too scary we could always huddle up, you know, for survival* - but then Mike appears in the kitchen, going straight for the chips. He's got a beer in one hand and his hair is a mess, half-curling waves flopping over his forehead.

"Hey," he says, digging out a handful of chips and nudging Emmett with a shoulder. "How you holdin' up? Have they managed to scare you away yet?"

Emmett nudges him back, bumping him with a hip - a gesture that gives Will a moment of pause. It's a strangely familiar motion. But then, Mike did say they were partners in class, so they must hang out a lot. Will just didn't think they knew each other very well.

"Nah, not quite. Give it time, though."

"The night is yet young," Mike quips. Then, addressing both Will and Emmett, "El was gonna set up Life, wanna play?"

After a few board games, completed with varying respect towards the actual rules and copious amounts of riotous laughter, the Party settles down to watch the movies. They turn the lights off, and Max was right - the glow sticks do look cool, once they're cracked and scattered around the cabin. El is wearing about ten of them all up and down her arms as bracelets, Max has strung a couple together as a necklace, and Dustin is trying to get Lucas to wear one as a crown. Will let El give him a glow stick bracelet on each wrist - orange on the right, green on the left - and Mike and Emmett have one each. Yellow for Mike - and Emmett, Will notices, has chosen pink. The others are sprinkled throughout the darkness of the cabin; little flashes of neon color in the shadows.

They settle down with their drinks and candy, spreading out blankets

and pillows to sit on. Mike and Emmett are on one side of the couch; Dustin flops down on the other end, taking up most of the space. Will and El sit in front of the couch, leaning back against it, and Lucas and Max sprawl out on their stomachs. The TV is small, old, and there's a moment of doubt as they load up the VHS and the screen just flickers with static. Then Max army-crawls forward and messes around with the connecting cables. She grunts triumphantly, the screen bursts to life, and the Party - plus Emmett - cheers.

Will watches the movie with a somewhat critical eye. It's not as good as the original - but then, it's hard to beat *Alien*. He's a little miffed that Dustin took up all the space on the couch, or he would have sat next to Emmett - just on the off-chance that maybe, just maybe, Emmett would want that hand to hold in the dark after all. But this is fine. Really. Will sits next to El on the floor, getting absorbed into the movie, shushing Dustin when he talks over the dialogue.

They're about an hour in when Will turns around to say something to Mike - and finds only an empty couch cushion. He looks to Dustin.

"Where'd they go?"

Dustin chews popcorn. "Huh?"

Will jerks a thumb at the space where Mike and Emmett used to be, and Dustin's brows lift in surprise. He shrugs.

"Probably to get more snacks," Lucas says, his eyes fixed on Ripley.

"Shh," El shushes them, and they all go quiet.

A few minutes pass. Mike and Emmett aren't back. Will leans forward, peering around the corner, but he doesn't see anyone in the shadows of the kitchen.

El turns as he stands up, her eyes reflecting the pale light of the screen. "Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna see where they went."

She shrugs, re-focusing on the movie, and Will makes his way out of the pool of light cast by the TV. The cabin is dark, save for glow

sticks stuck in random places, and he goes slowly. There's no one in the kitchen, or the bathroom, or the bedroom. He tries the porch. Mike probably went to get something from the car and got distracted. The door squeaks closed behind him, and then he's standing in the crisp night air. Moths flock around the porch light, smacking into it in their erratic flight. No Mike, no Emmett, but -

There. Two glow sticks on a porch railing, both curled into circles. One yellow, one pink. They're linked together. And suddenly Will realizes: they're Mike and Emmett's bracelets. But if their bracelets are here, where are they?

He's on edge now. There's not a lot in these woods that would pose a real threat, but... Well, a Party member disappearing is never a good sign. And anyway, where could they have gone? They're in the middle of nowhere. Both of the cars are still here. Did something happen to them? Are they playing some sort of prank?

Will steps off the porch, skin pebbling with goosebumps, and goes to peer into the car windows. Nothing.

He's about to turn back for the porch when he hears something. A tiny noise, barely distinguishable from the rustles and whispers of the nighttime forest. But then he hears it again - a kind of shuffling noise, paired with what might be a whispering voice. He creeps towards it. He moves lightly around the side of the cabin, old instincts preventing him from making any noise, anxiety trilling in his veins. His senses are on high alert; the only light comes from the increasingly distant golden glow of the porch light, and the emerging moon and stars.

He's about to call out when he hears another whisper - and then an answering mumble, too soft for Will to make out words. He recognizes the voice, though, and he relaxes slightly as he slips soundlessly around a bush.

He's half-convinced that Mike is about to pop out at him with a roar, and Will is going to jump, and Mike is going to laugh, and Will is going to smack him. But none of that happens. Instead, what Will sees through the sparse branches of the bush when he approaches is... it's... He's not sure *what* he's looking at, actually. It's just a shape in

the semi-dark, and it takes his eyes a second to adjust - and then all at once he realizes what he's seeing, what he's hearing, and he's pretty sure he feels his soul leave his body. The shape is actually two shapes. Two partly-dressed figures, pressed up against each other, leaning against the trunk of a tree. The shirtless one is Mike, and he's got one hand down the front of Emmett's unzipped jeans.

From this angle Will can make out their profiles, and a hot-cold flash of shock bursts through him as he watches his best friend shove at the fabric of Emmett's pants, pushing them down just far enough to bare - well - everything.

They haven't noticed him. And he's frozen, eyes locked on. He can't move, can't look away, even though he knows he needs to leave, *now*.

Emmett is kissing Mike. Somehow, that detail hits harder than the location of Mike's right hand. Emmett is kissing Mike, open-mouthed and messy, the wet glint of their tongues just barely visible in the darkness. The sight of it makes something buckle in the pit of Will's stomach. His own mouth is dry; he swallows.

This isn't happening. He's dreaming. It can't be happening - except that Will is ruthlessly, undeniably *here*, grounded in time and place, trapped in his own motionless muscles. Crickets peep to themselves, off in the woods, and a slight breeze stirs the leaves of the bush he's staring through. The glow of the porch light is faint, but now that his eyes have adjusted it may as well be the sun. He can see everything. There's no way his brain could have fabricated this; it's no dream or hallucination. The only remaining explanation is reality, and that... That's not... it can't...

Mike's fist is pumping steadily, his whole arm jacking up and down with the motion, and Emmett makes this half-swallowed *noise* into Mike's mouth. Soft, and somehow brimming with tension, and Will feels his pulse throb in his temples and fingertips as his own pants start to feel a little tight. He's never heard a guy make a sound like that before - not outside of his own imagination. His eyes are drawn to Mike, then - drawn like a magnetic pull to his best friend. His unattainable, dorky, infuriating, gorgeous, *straight* best friend. His bare torso, pale in the darkness and pebbled with gooseflesh like

Will's. His jaw, working as Emmett kisses him enthusiastically - and oh *fuck*, Emmett is dipping a hand down, rubbing a palm over the front of Mike's jeans in turn, and Mike *pushes into the touch*, and Will shivers so abruptly and violently that he's surprised they didn't sense it somehow.

Will can hear someone's breath catch audibly, but he can't tell which one it was. Emmett's other hand has knotted itself into Mike's hair, tugging his head to the side, biting down hard at the junction of Mike's neck and shoulder until Will can see Mike's whole body start to squirm under the pressure. Mike gives a sharp little gasp. And Will knows he shouldn't look, he *knows*, but his eyes slide down between their bodies until he makes out the red-pink tip of -

Will's eyes squeeze closed of their own accord, his synapses overwhelmed, glutted with input. He breathes hard for a moment, and when he opens his eyes again Mike is moving. His frame sinks, pine needles crackling slightly under his knees as he kneels and - holy shit - *opens his mouth* , those full, pretty lips parting and those deep-dark eyes looking up at Emmett, affectionate and hungry for approval as he wraps a hand around the base and -

That's all Will can take.

He's not sure how he makes it back to the porch. One moment Will is watching Mike flick his pink tongue over the glistening-damp head of Emmett's dick, and the next he's stepping up onto the porch, his heart jammed in his throat and punching away at a million miles per hour. He doesn't remember when his muscles finally unfroze, or how he managed to tiptoe away without alerting them. He leans against the wall of the cabin, panting like he just ran a mile, and waits - but no one comes around the corner after him. They didn't see him.

What the hell.

Mike is -

He was -

Shit.

This whole time, Will thought Mike was straight as an arrow. But he - he can't be. Right? He wouldn't have done that if he - damnit. Damnit, Mike! He had twelve whole years to say something, and - well, then again, Will never said anything either, but - Mike wouldn't have done that if he wasn't queer, right? There's no way. Did Will even just see that?

He's reeling, nearly dizzy, and he has another problem. He can't really go back in to the Party with this obvious tent in his jeans. Then again, he can't stay out here for much longer, either. What if someone else decides to come looking for the three of them? What if Mike and his... his... his *boyfriend* finish up and head inside, only to find Will standing around on the porch, trying to will away a hard-on?

He takes three, six, nine deep breaths. In and out. Then he hastily tucks the persistent boner up under his belt, gathers himself, and eases open the front door.

When questioned, he says that Mike and Emmett went to take a walk. The Party accepts it without much question, and Will hugs a pillow as he stares through the screen, not absorbing a single detail of the movie.

Notes for the Chapter:

Don't worry, I'll still be finishing The Unmarked Mixtape. I'll probably be switching back and forth between chapters of this and that as I finish up that one.

But, yaaaay, I finally started writing that one prompt! I have a lot of Thoughts about what might happen if Mike was kind of "first to the queer scene," instead of Will as we almost always see in fanon, and I wanted to do a fic that kind of flipped their usual roles and explored that. So I think this'll be fun! (Plenty of angst along the way... but fluff and smut too :))

Please do let me know what you think! I love love love to hear your thoughts, especially just starting up a new fic like this :)

2. Forest and Ocean

He's in shock for about the next twenty four hours. In denial. His brain keeps telling him that he couldn't possibly have seen that, that it couldn't have happened, couldn't have been real. The memory feels more like a dream, and he almost might think that he *did* dream it if it weren't for all the exact little details - the crispness of the visuals in his mind.

He goes about the next morning with his happy face plastered on. The old defense mechanism is second nature. He drifts around the cabin in an automatic haze as the group rouses from sleeping bags, makes coffee in the cabin's little kitchen, eats cold leftover pizza for breakfast. He makes cheerful conversation as they clean up, *hey El, yeah, fine, I think I slept weird, my back is killing me, do you want the last pizza slice?*

The group clambers into their two different cars, El locks the cabin behind them - with her keys, since Emmett is watching - and the Sinclairs' unwieldy mini-van lumbers and bounces away down the dirt road. And Will does not turn around to watch Mike's car rolling along behind them.

He gets home. He says hi to his mom. He tells her about the party - music, glow sticks and *Aliens* . He goes on errands, does homework, blots out the events of last night with the inertia of the mundane.

It's only that night, lying in bed, that the shockwave loosens its hold. Over the day, he almost could have forgotten about everything. It felt like a different world, a different life. Those two things couldn't possibly have happened in the same existence. Standing in line at the grocery store, tearing a hole in his math homework with a hard eraser, playing fetch with Chester and getting muddy paw prints on his shirt - these things couldn't possibly coexist with a world where Will had been standing in the prickling-cool night air, gazing through a lace of leaves in shock at his best friend pressed up against another boy.

He realizes, all at once, how turned on he is. The images of the two together keep flashing in his mind. Emmett's tongue stroking into

Mike's mouth. Mike's hand pumping feverishly between Emmett's legs. Emmett's fingers tangled in Mike's messy dark locks and pulling, exposing Mike's throat until he breaks the kiss and dives, sucking at the pale skin of Mike's neck between gasps. Placing the damning bruises that Will has been puzzling over for weeks. And Mike... Mike bracing his palms on Emmett's hips as he dropped to his knees, only a hint of uncertainty in his actions as he brought his face level with Emmett's dick and opened his mouth - his lips shiny with saliva and flushed red from their kiss, even in the dark.

Will can tell his cheeks are burning a hot scarlet, deep and tingling as a fever-flush. He's never seen anything like that before. Not even in a movie, not even in pictures. The coveted magazines that sometimes get handed around locker rooms or flaunted in parentless circumstances never have anything like *that* in their glossy pages. Ever.

And Will, shamefully, spits into a palm and reaches into his own pajama pants and almost wishes - he imagines - he imagines that he was caught. That Mike's eyes opened at just the right moment, before he knelt, and caught Will's through the brush. That, after a heartbeat of shock, Mike lifted a free hand. Pressed a finger to his lips. Beckoned.

Will imagines himself moving forward woodenly, heart hammering as it is now, breath shallow, throat dry. He imagines Emmett noticing him, surprise mixed with lust in his blue-gray, half-lidded eyes. In Will's imagination he stands shakily beside them, close enough to make out their intermixing scents, and the white-hot coil in his abdomen clenches and rings as Mike takes his hand and guides it forward, pressing Will's palm to the front of his jeans, where Will feels the rigid heat within. His fingers twitch as he imagines undoing Mike's belt, sliding the zipper down, and dipping a hand inside to find flame-hot flesh. Mike sighs and pushes into the touch - like he pushed into Emmett's touch - as Will gives a stroke. Emmett takes Will by the jaw and buries his mouth against Will's, the ring on the side of his lower lip warm as his skin.

And in real life, under the covers and panting so hard he's jolting with the contractions of his diaphragm, Will arches and groans.

Mike would... Will licks his lips. Maybe Mike would kneel in front of Will, instead. Lips parting. Looking up at *Will* with those oh-so-familiar eyes, dark as the night sky with low-light and lust. Affectionate and hungry for approval. Will imagines Mike pulling down the zipper of *Will's* jeans, Mike baring *Will* to the cool night air, Mike bringing the hot cavern of his mouth down over *Will* .

He comes imagining Mike's mouth on him. And afterwards, it takes barely thirty seconds before a thick stew of unpleasant, wriggling emotions congeals in the pit of his stomach. Obviously he's surprised. Stunned, blindsided, gobsmacked - call it what you will.

But there's also guilt there. For seeing what he wasn't meant to see, fantasizing about what's not his twice over. And jealousy. Oh, yes. With the initial shock chipping away, and the lust fading, Will is left with an empty bed and one thought looping through his mind: *Why him, and not me?*

Emmett misses Washington.

He misses the city, he misses the inlets, he misses the streets - the hills so steep that the houses seemed to sit at a forty five degree angle to the sidewalk. He misses the rain. He misses sitting in the bus and watching the misty horizon roll by. He misses his room in his old apartment - the one on the third floor that looked out on one of those steep streets, where, in-between the buildings, he could see the tiniest sliver of water if he craned his neck right. He misses the bookshops, and his old school, and the cherry trees, and most of all he misses his band. His friends. Hell, he even misses his ex. He misses catching the bus home with the gang after school. Hoofing it the five blocks from the bus stop to the Brady's expensive house in the suburbs at the edge of the city. Setting up in the garage. He misses C.J. scribbling lyrics in red pen and messing around on the synthesizer, driving everyone nuts. He misses Warren tapping compulsively away on drums, Tom on the keyboard, Manda at the mic. Manda Panda. Manda at the Mic. And Danny, always showing him up on lead guitar, the obnoxious bastard.

Yeah. He misses Danny.

He's not super jazzed about Hawkins, to be perfectly honest. It's so *flat*, and *hot* , and so brown. There's so little *green*. So little rain. The trees are sharp and scraggly, and the dirt is coarse. Everything feels so bare, so suffocating with empty space. Back home there was always the city all around - glass spires reaching up into the low-hanging clouds, people on every side, the constant hum and glow of city life. You could always find someplace open, at any hour, if you needed caffeine or food or even just the next book in a series. Here it's like... there's nothing. Everything closes at 8:00pm. The houses feel about a mile apart. In the city there's always *somebody* nearby. In Hawkins, Emmett feels like he's living in a ghost town. You might go out and not see a single other soul in a mile of walking - or two miles. It makes his skin crawl. In a crowd you might get pickpocketed, or grabbed by desperate panhandlers, but at least there's some comfort in the presence of other humans. A sense of distant kinship. The protection of anonymity. Out here in the openness, it's like... anything could happen to you, and no one would ever know. You could vanish into thin air, and who would be the wiser?

Whenever he walks home, or goes out past dusk, every horror movie he's ever seen flashes through his head. Remote houses with dark pasts. The sense of being watched when no one else is around. Things rustling in the cornfields. Isolation. *No one is going to help you. You are alone.*

Emmett *hates* horror movies.

The house doesn't help. It's his aunt's house, really. It's on the scraggly edge of the suburbs, a couple streets from Hawkins' pitiful shopping district. It's small. Two stories, but narrow, and worn-down. And it was cramped *before* he and his mom moved in.

And the new school... well. Hawkins is... not progressive, let's put it that way. Back home Emmett was fairly comfortable about being queer. He didn't exactly go around *shouting* about it, but he didn't feel like he was gonna get beat up if he said something with the wrong inflection or wore something too brightly pink. He was far from the most interesting person in the school; he could turn invisible if he needed to. And anyway, he had his friends. Here it's another story.

No, Emmett isn't super jazzed about Hawkins. But there are a few bright spots. O'Reilly's New and Used Books, for one thing - that cozy little bookstore he discovered a week after moving in.

His dad is thousands of miles away. That's a huge plus.

And there's Mike.

Emmett misses the ocean, but Mike makes him a little more fond of these sharp, sparse woods that at first seemed so unfriendly. Mike's eyes are like deep, rich soil, or damp bark, or - when the light is dim and Mike's eyes are wide and hungry - like the night sky, dark and bottomless. (Nothing like Danny's piercing silver eyes, which were like rain clouds.) Emmett misses the ocean, but Mike is all forest - and he thinks that maybe he could acquire a taste for it. Mike smells the way that Emmett thinks a log cabin should smell - not like pine, but like resin and clove and spice, and something lighter, something more sunny. Cherry chapstick, as he discovers, and the fresh-linen scent that comes from Karen Wheeler's way of doing the laundry.

Yeah, he could definitely acquire a taste for Mike. For the way that Mike is enthusiastic and maybe a tad obnoxious (like Danny), and how he has dark, wavy-curly hair (darker and curlier than Danny's) and how he had never done so much as kiss a boy, before Emmett (nothing like Danny). He's a quick and enthusiastic learner. Always eager to please. Always a little afraid he's not doing it right.

Mike seemed like such a godsend, really, when Emmett arrived in this little town and faced all the hostile expressions in the school hallways. The whispers.

Look at his hair. Look at his nails. Is that nail polish? Look at his piercings. What a homo.

And then there was this Mike Wheeler guy. Open, and instantly caring, and spilling emotions out all over his face. Giddy and grumpy to an artless degree. Sweet and curious and loud and a little abrasive sometimes.

Mike never shot Emmett a dirty look in the hallway, never muttered something about him to a group of sniggering friends. And when they

ended up as lab partners in Biology, well, that was the nail in the coffin. Emmett liked him.

Mike had fantasy paperbacks in his backpack, instead of science fiction, and he was in drama and AV club instead of a garage band, and his eyes were dark brown instead of bright silver, and he didn't smoke. He never had scabs healing on his knuckles or a ripening bruise on his cheekbone from throwing himself into fights. He wasn't arrogant like Danny. He didn't chew cinnamon gum like Danny. But certain parts of Mike - just little edges and corners of him - reminded Emmett of the ex he left behind in the evergreen state. And when Mike started mirroring Emmett's subtle flirtations back at him - when he started leaning closer instead of away, and glancing every so often down at the piercing at the left corner of Emmett's mouth - well, Emmett thought, maybe he could pretend.

And the thing was, he could. If he really wanted to, he could have sealed his mouth against those shy lips and buried his hands in that dark hair and he could have pictured Danny. But - and this is the funny thing - *he didn't want to*. Because once he had Mike cornered in the lab storage room, while they were supposed to be working on a lab, Emmett took the dive with his heart in his throat. He pressed one hand to Mike's hip and leaned in. And Mike - well, Mike froze up for a moment, and Emmett thought, *uh-oh*. But then he pressed back. Slowly. Cautiously. Like he was afraid the whole thing would shatter like glass if he moved too suddenly. Like he was testing it out.

The door handle scraped, starting to turn, and Mike shot out of his reach so fast that Emmett almost fell over. They went about their business with faces burning, silent and awkward as a blonde girl in heels entered and began gathering lab supplies.

But later, after school, Mike appeared at Emmett's locker. They walked home side-by-side.

Emmett kissed him again, after that, in the cramped and cluttered and half-unpacked room in the attic of his aunt's house, and he realized that - no. He didn't want to imagine Danny in Mike's place. Because Mike was observant, and he *cared* about things - so much, and wore it on his sleeve - and he was actually pretty adorable, and attractive in that awkward, dorky way, and interesting, and kind,

and... and, well, Emmett needed somebody. He knew *no one* here. He had no one. And it was about time he moved on from his ex, anyway.

So he chased it. One thing led to another. They exchanged numbers. They went out to the movies. Mike was a nervous wreck the whole time, which Emmett found a little endearing. They talked. About movies and music and anime (Emmett) and D&D (Mike), and favorite foods and school and Hawkins and Seattle. They talked for hours - never about the deep stuff. Neither of them really wanted to veer into that territory. Emmett never brought up the grittier details of his dad, his old home, his past heartbreaks and miseries. Mike clearly had a few secrets of his own that he kept to himself, and Emmett didn't pry. But they talked late into the night, and it was around 2:00am that Emmett finally ventured the question.

And that's how, about a month into the semester, they became boyfriends.

It was about three weeks later that Mike invited him to hang out with his group of friends - "the Party," as he calls them.

That was the second time in Hawkins that Emmett met someone and thought, *oh, you too?*

Will.

Mike's best friend. Half a head shorter than Emmett, with worn-thin flannel rolled up to his elbows and brown hair coming undone from its touch of gel, steadily falling forward into his face. The artist that Mike won't shut up about.

Oh, Will used to love these when we were kids.

Oh, Will did a book report on that last year.

I think I left my jacket at Will's house.

That reminds me, Will drew this comic where...

I was talking to Will earlier and...

Will this.

Will that.

They can barely go a conversation without at least one mention of him; of course Emmett was more than a tad curious to meet him. And of course he was more than a tad intrigued when he started picking up on certain signals.

He could be wrong. He's misinterpreted the signs before. And anyway, even if Will *had* been flirting with him, Emmett has a boyfriend already. A sweet, dorky boyfriend who has a proclivity to lapse into impassioned speeches about the lore of fictional worlds, and who keeps Emmett company during his empty days in this empty town, and who kisses him like it's something novel, something fascinating, precious, worthy of slow and thorough exploration.

Emmett has Mike. So whether or not Will had been flirting is a moot point.

Is it worth wondering about? Maybe. But is it worth bringing up? Nah.

Anyway, that was a couple days ago.

Now, they're near a back corner of Hawkins' sole record store, flipping through a selection of soft punk rock that Emmett is trying to convince Mike to listen to. The cashier isn't paying attention - she's perched on a stool behind the front counter, reading a worn paperback and occasionally popping her gum - and the only other shoppers left a moment ago. So they're not too worried about letting their hands brush and touch and overlap every few moments. He knows from experience not to try to hold Mike's hand in public, though, or he'll get a sharp jab in the ribs and a hiss of, "*Someone might see.*"

He's just happy to be out doing something with someone. Happy and enjoying the moment, enjoying the autumn leaves falling past the window at the front of the record store, enjoying the dusty warmth of the store after the faint, sunny October chill outside, enjoying the way that his own denim sherpa jacket sits on Mike's shoulders. The

sleeves of Mike's kitten-gray sweater are a little too short on Emmett's arms, leaving a pale stripe of skin bare above his wrists, but otherwise it fits fairly well. Mike's scent has settled into the corded material, and it hangs around Emmett like a whisper as he drifts from rack to rack.

He's out of the house, he's doing something, the sun is shining, there's the promise of a nice, long, clandestine makeout session later, and best of all, he's not alone. It's a good day.

"You've never heard of Articles of Faith?"

"No, never."

"Frightwig?"

Mike shakes his head, amused.

"You know, Frightwig! *Cat Farm Faboo*?"

"Okay, these are just nonsense words. You're just saying nonsense words now."

Emmett pulls a record with a little exclamation and pushes it at Mike. "Okay, look, you'll like this one. It's The Psychedelic Furs."

Mike takes it like it might explode. "Does this one have people screaming over a lot of electric guitar?"

He points at Mike. "Rude. Hush. And, no, it's more your speed."

"What does that mean?"

"You know. Less heavy, more..." He makes a face. "Easygoing, I guess?"

Mike scoffs, but flips the record over, scans the song list, checks the price. "How is it that you're so bizarrely cheerful all the time and yet you mostly listen to - I don't even know, demon orgies? It sounds like demon orgies. You're weird, you know that?"

"I keep all my rage in my music. This one's not full of screaming,

though, I promise.” And because it’s a good day, and Emmett is feeling more like himself than he has in weeks, he starts singing in demonstration.

He wasn’t a singer in his band back home, just a guitarist. His voice isn’t the best. He sings quietly, so the cashier won’t hear him over the store audio system.

“Love my way, it’s a new road,” he starts, a little off-key. He grabs for Mike’s hand, and Mike shoves him and laughs, embarrassed. *“I follow where my mind goes. They’d put us on a railroad, they’d dearly make us pay, for laughing in their faces, and making it our way.”*

Emmett jostles him, grinning, and Mike mutters, “Stop.” But he’s smiling. Then he peers uncertainly at the record again. “Is that about...?”

Emmett lifts his eyebrows in question.

“You know.”

“Do you mean, is it queer?”

A shrug. Mike tries to look nonchalant.

Emmett shrugs back. The motion makes his guitar case start to slide off his shoulder and he hefts it back up. “Could be.”

Mike considers the record once more, and then tucks it under his arm.

Mike, as Emmett has discovered, is woefully uneducated when it comes to queer culture. Not Mike’s fault - conservative parents will do that to you. And anyway, Emmett has been having more fun than he’d like to admit playing the tour guide.

Well, if you look to your left you’ll see Queen. Specifically, our lord and savior Freddie Mercury. Of course you’ve heard of The Village People, yes? Yes. Bit mainstream, but they’re okay. Why are you laughing? Let’s see, we have Bowie, Madonna... Did you see Stand By Me ? Oh, wait, you’re a Star Wars geek, right? Luke and Han. Think about it. Star Trek, if you want to be an even bigger geek. Have you read any of Stephen

King's stuff? Or are you more of a classics person? Because Oscar Wilde - oh, my god, wait. Please tell me you've seen Les Miserables. What do you mean, what does that have to do with anything? It's Les Miserables, Michael. Les Miserables is always relevant.

Mike pays for his record, and Emmett pays for the one Mike picked out for him - "Payback," as Mike put it - and they leave the store.

Fuck it.

That's been Mike's primary mode of decision making in the past year.

Fuck it, fuck everything, fuck the whole world. All those angsty singers were right: society is a garbage fire, the world is broken, nothing is fair, and very few things are right. They should be. They could be. But they aren't.

His parents mutter about *phases* and *teenage rebellion* when they think he can't hear them over the TV. Well, if realizing that society is bullshit makes him a rebel, then fuck it. He's a rebel.

Fuck it.

It started about a year ago.

Well, if he's being honest, it started several years ago. The whole great mess of it. If he's *really* really honest with himself - which he'd rather not be, most of the time, not about this - it started with the Upside Down. When the world turned on its head and his best friend was gone, and then dead, and then miraculously alive again, and there were monsters, and other worlds, and a girl that could do magic, and secret government agencies, and secrets upon secrets upon secrets. He was twelve years old, and the world was not the safe, stable, rules-abiding place he had always been told. And that's where the seed was planted.

And then he was thirteen, increasingly sullen as he glared at the floor and listened to teachers and parents tell him all about how *"This isn't like you,"* and *"You're smarter than this,"* and, *"You've got to shape up your act, or you'll be facing the consequences."*

First it was graffitiing the bathroom stall, cussing out a teacher, feeling a strange flutter somewhere deep in his diaphragm when he grabbed Will's hand that day in the Byers' paper-strewn house.

Then he was fourteen, and it was all happening again, and he was trying so hard to do what he was supposed to do. To shape up his act. He straightened his hair, he doted on his girlfriend, he rolled his eyes at things that weren't cool.

And then fifteen. And he hated it. All of it. He let his hair grow out shaggy and messy and curlier than ever, and those seeds planted years before came to life. He was a rebel again, and this time he refused to back down. "Shaping up" hadn't worked, so fuck it.

It was the only thing that kept him sane as his life both fell apart thread by thread and, at the same time, settled into a suffocating, crushing normality. His sister left for college - left him alone. His parents fought more, and then less, and less was worse. Less fighting meant days-long icy silences, tension that even Holly picked up on. Bad news in the papers, on TV, in hearsay. And Mike took to burying himself in fiction to get away from it all. He carried a Sharpie marker with him and started scrawling his favorite controversial quotes in places they'd be seen. He argued with everyone, about everything. He broke up with his girlfriend, after two years of slowly realizing that romance wasn't right for them. He got detention frequently - and then less frequently, as he learned to be stealthy. He snuck out. He went to parties with friends he had made in Drama. He ranted and vented to his best friend, and they frequently ended up on the roof outside his bedroom window, watching the stars as they talked about life, the universe, and everything. He briefly considered getting a piercing or tattoo. He bought a big, square, three-year calendar and meticulously counted down the exact number of days until graduation.

Then he was sixteen and doing a lot of thinking. A lot of writing. He kept a spiral-bound notebook as a journal - which, in a fit of frenzied paranoia after his mother deep-cleaned the house and nearly discovered it, he burned in the Wheeler family fireplace when no one else was home. Because if his parents had found out about him, found out what he had been thinking, what he had been *doing* ...

It was the Upside Down that did it. At least, that's what he always blames - what he points his finger to when he starts to beat himself up about what a freak he's turned into. Because if blood-seeking faceless monsters can emerge from punctures in the fabric of reality, then surely the world has bigger problems than a boy who likes girls - and boys. And one boy in particular.

It took him nearly two years after everything returned to normal before he could puzzle it out from the mess of his brain. He had known, deep down, for years. But once he admitted to himself that he had a crush on his best friend, and that he had for a long time... The dam broke. Everything else started to fall into place within a period of barely a week. He started remembering things he had never given a second thought to before. Signs he never saw. It was like looking at a Magic Eye Picture: everything is just a meaningless mishmash, at first, and then the longer you stare the more details you see. And then all at once something in your brain shifts and you're looking at a cohesive picture. Tah-dah! You're gay.

All the crushes he never realized were crushes. All the classmates he thought he hated, or actors he thought he just admired. A deluge of little mundane moments that suddenly took the form of a pattern.

The *Raiders of the Lost Arc* poster - featuring a grinning, half-shirtless Harrison Ford - that he begged his parents to buy for his room when he was ten, even though his mother said the movie was too violent and he shouldn't be watching stuff like that.

All the times when seven-year-old Mike pretended not to know how to braid during craft time so that the loud-mouthed, dark-haired boy in the seat next to him would grab his hands and show him.

Five-year-old Mike and Will, very seriously planning their wedding with the aid of crayons for note-taking and illustration.

It's just, Will grew up and dated Samantha Elwood in eighth grade, and discusses pretty actresses with Dustin and Lucas, and makes a strange expression whenever anyone mentions gay people. Probably because he got so much shit for it when they were kids. Funny old world, isn't it? All that time, Troy and his goonies were targeting Will, when the real queer was just a few feet to the left.

That was last year, and he's had a little time to adjust to the idea. At least, he's not panicking anymore. As much. So really, after everything, it wasn't that big of a jump to let Emmett kiss him in the lab supply closet that day.

Fuck it, nothing means anything anyway. And he doesn't want to end up like his parents. Why not like guys?

Why not hesitantly flirt with the silvery-blonde, pierced, pretty obviously queer new guy in school?

Why not let him lean in close, then closer, and closer, with the excuse of brushing an eyelash from Mike's cheek, until Mike could feel Emmett's breath on his own lips?

Why not show up at his locker after school? Why not walk home with him? Why not kiss him again on the bare mattress on the floor of his room, no bed frame, moving boxes half-spilled all over the attic? Why not do it again? Hands shaking, heart pounding painfully, brain a dizzy tangle of giddiness and attraction and sharp-heady fear of being caught.

It's been an insane, halfway wonderful whirlwind of a semester. Mike feels thirteen again - like he has a significant other for the first time all over again. First kisses again, first time holding hands, first time going on a date. Except, he and El were just fifteen when they broke up. Still basically kids. The most they had ever done was kiss, and even that was usually under the hawk-eyed supervision of parents. They had never driven a little ways out of town to a back road, and parked, and climbed into the back, and kissed. And kissed. And kissed. El never clambered through Mike's window late at night, when his family was sleeping, and slipped cold hands under his shirt, whispering, "Warm me up?" They never burrowed into bed together to sleep - and then didn't sleep. All of that is new. Not just new because it's with a boy, but *completely* new. Terrifying-new, breathtaking new. Addicting new.

Stolen moments and late nights. Exchanging favorite music. Driving in circles - driving out into the farmlands just to escape town for a couple hours. Acoustic guitar. Inscrutable Japanese animation on VHS, subtitled with varying levels of accuracy. Going to any old

movie just to sit in the back corner and make out, or whisper-critique the movie if there are too many people nearby. The smell of the slender menthol cigarettes that Emmett sometimes buys. Carefully concealed hickeys and rain-slick pavement. Passing notes in school. Hiding out in the school bathroom to avoid going to class, passing Emmett's electronic football back and forth. Emmett's calico cat, Nausicaä, jumping up on Emmett's lap and butting in between them, demanding attention. Once, sparkling wine smuggled from Mike's mother's stash. Secrecy and adrenaline. This has been Mike's semester.

Emmett's lighter catches with a hiss, and a moment later a trail of whirling smoke flutters out into the cool air around his head.

He offered Mike one, once, but the smoke made him feel sick - and anyway, he's too afraid that if he comes home smelling like smoke, his parents will pounce on him. They'll pounce on anything, lately. Any little excuse to distract themselves from the marriage that fell apart years ago. Irrationally, he fears that if they smell smoke on him, somehow they'll trace it back to Emmett, and to *Mike and Emmett*, and what they've been doing, and it'll be a life sentence in the nuthouse for Michael A. Wheeler.

He tries not to think about it.

It's fall, and Hawkins is briefly dazzling with bright, creamy yellows and smoky oranges and, here and there, a flash of rusty red. Leaves dot the sidewalk, too fresh to be crunchy yet. Halloween decorations have been up for a couple weeks; plastic skeletons sway from trees and paper bats are taped up in windows.

They're on their way to meet up with the Party again, since the party at the cabin went well. Everyone seemed to like Emmett okay - and he could use some more friends in Hawkins. Nobody gave him any weird looks, that Mike could see. Nobody made any comments about the black polish on his nails or the pin on his jacket. Nobody noticed when they slipped out the front door halfway through the movie.

Mike adjusts his grip on the paper shopping bag he's carrying, casting a sidelong glance at his boyfriend.

He might be getting addicted to adrenaline, he reflects. He'd never done anything like that, before. Before he and Emmett slipped out the door when no one was paying attention, snuck a little ways off into the woods, and Mike knelt on the forest floor with his heart in his throat and gave his boyfriend a blowjob in the middle of the forest. That was a first for him. Well, the sneaking off to make out, not so much - but they've never gone quite so far out in the open before. Anything beyond a zipper is usually reserved for somewhere with a locked door. Emmett's bedroom, in the narrow, crowded house that he and his mom now share with his aunt. The back of the Wheeler's second car ("Mike's" car), parked out in a dark corner beyond the edges of town. The basement, if Mike's parents aren't home. The AV room, once. But never outside, a stone's throw from where the Party sat watching *Aliens* in the cabin.

It was the second ever blowjob Mike has given. He was cold - nearly shivering, because it was nighttime in the woods in October and his shirt was lying somewhere behind him, caught on the prickly branches of a bush where he had tossed it. The cold seemed to make everything electric, lending a sharp, starlight-stark quality to the moment. It made him even more desperate to press as close to his boyfriend as possible, shoving into the heat of his torso, his mouth.

Mike wonders, furtively, if Emmett might return the favor the next time they're alone. Or if, like last time, he'll coat Mike's fingers with lube from his own hand and guide them down, angling Mike's hand with his own, voice throaty as he murmurs, "Like this."

And then, because he's going to pop a boner if he doesn't cut it out, he makes himself think about something else. Anything else. Homework. Detention. Halloween candy. Long division.

Okay. There. Crisis averted.

Emmett's gaze is distant. They've been silent since they left the record store, and Mike almost wishes he could open his mouth and say, *Tell me what you're thinking. I want to know what's happening in there. Tell me why you stare at the clouds so much. Do they remind you of something? Is there a reason you never talk much about your dad? Is there a reason your hands shake when somebody yells just a little too loudly? I want to tell you about a journal that I burned. I want to know*

when you realized you were queer. Was it just a year ago, like me? Have you always known? Are you angry? Are you so angry at the world that you want to tear something down with your bare hands? Are you counting down the days until you can graduate high school and never come back? Is that why your music is so loud and rough - because you never are otherwise? Is your smile real or are you sad inside?

But they don't say that kind of stuff.

Mike shakes himself, and points. "Turn here. We were gonna meet at Dustin's. You still wanna go?"

Emmett adjusts the strap of his guitar case on his shoulder and flashes a bright smile, scattering the thoughts in Mike's mind in an instant. He's never met a boy who was so, well... pretty. Winter-pale, especially with the platinum hair and piercings glinting bright silver in the sun. Gray-blue eyes fringed with short, dark lashes and dark brows. Narrow face, narrow nose. One slightly crooked tooth in a row of otherwise perfect pearly whites. A pinkish tint to his cheekbones, nose and ears, thanks to the nip of cold.

"Follow you anywhere, Cap'n," Emmett says amiably, and Mike smiles back.

"Onwards, then."

Will and Mike stare at each other from across the Hendersons' dining room with matching expressions of surprise.

More accurately, Will's expression of surprise is directed towards Emmett. To put it delicately, he was not previously aware that Mike's "friend" was going to be joining them today.

And Mike, based on his expression, completely forgot that the Party was going to play D&D today.

"Hi," they say at the same time, with identical tones of wary surprise.

Emmett lifts a hand a beat later. "Hey."

"Hey, man." It's Dustin, his wide grin just barely visible over the

swaying tower of snacks he's ferrying to the table. "You playing with us today?"

Emmett glances at the table, clearly puzzled by the grid board, character sheets and dice. "Board games?" he guesses.

"Dungeons and Dragons," Mike says, slipping briefly into what Will long ago termed his Professor Voice. It comes out when he's explaining something. "God, I forgot that was today. It's a collaborative story game that -"

"Oh, this is that fantasy thing you were telling me about."

"Right, right."

Mike shucks his coat as he talks and - actually, that's not Mike's coat. And Emmett's dark gray sweater is not *Emmett's* sweater. Will tries very hard, and fails very quickly, not to imagine how the switch occurred.

"You don't play to win," Max interjects as she enters from the kitchen, holding a Dr. Pepper in one of Mrs. Henderson's rubbery foam drink cozies. The cozy features a print of Alf the Alien holding a fork and a knife, and it reads, *I ♥ Cats!* "In D&D, there are no winners." She plops down at the table, staring Emmett in the eyes with calculated seriousness. "Only losers."

"Doesn't that make you a loser?" Lucas says from behind her as he and El enter. "Oh, hey Everett."

"Emmett," Emmett and Mike correct.

"Irrelevant," Max says to Lucas, and takes a sip of Dr. Pepper. She seems to notice Mike's expression all at once. "You forgot, didn't you?"

"Uh." Mike glances at Emmett. He puffs out his cheeks. "Yeah."

"You don't have to DM," El pipes up from Will's shoulder, making him jump. She ruffles his hair until he ducks away. "Will can take over if you're busy."

Not technically a lie. He's done it once or twice before.

"Uh," says Mike again. Then his voice lowers and all at once he's talking to Emmett - *just* Emmett, turning to him and ignoring everyone else, lowering his voice as if they're sharing some secret. "I'm sorry, I totally forgot -"

"No, it's fine."

"It's just, we hardly ever get a chance to play anymore -"

"It's fine."

"I mean, do you wanna... watch, or...?"

"Whatever you wanna do."

"You could play if you wanted."

Will's head snaps up. Emmett? Play? As in, join the Party? Obviously Mike just means for today. A temporary arrangement, not for good. But still - he can't just do that. Can he? He can't just casually invite somebody to the Party - to *their* Party, *their* campaign, *their* thing that they've been doing for *years* -

"I dunno how to play," Emmett is saying, and then El offers, "It's not that hard," and Dustin says, "Yeah, we can guide you through it."

Will casts a desperate glance around the table, trying to psychically communicate, *Why are we okay with this? We didn't talk this over. Mike didn't even ask us if this was okay. This is our thing. Our thing. Guys?*

He gets a shrug back from Lucas that might mean something along the lines of, *Whatever, man. I wasn't expecting it either, but who cares?*

El - who Will has the strangest feeling heard his entire internal monologue as clearly as if he was speaking aloud - meets his eyes. She tilts her head - a question. Probably, *What's your deal?*

He doesn't know how to answer. So instead, with a decision so sudden he almost knocks over his drink, he pulls a blank character sheet from the folder and shoves it at his best friend's boyfriend.

“Here,” he says. There’s bitter taste at the back of his throat. He swallows it down and summons up his *everything-is-fine* mask, smiling. “Mike’s the Paladin, Dustin’s a Bard, Lucas is a Ranger, El’s our Mage, Max is a Zoomer, and I’m a Cleric. You could be a Rogue or a Monk or a Druid. Or maybe a Fighter.”

He almost says, *Or a Wizard*, but he doesn’t want Emmett to be a Wizard. Will the Wise was a sort of wizard, back when Will used to play that character. Will is the Party member that deals with magic. He and El. Cleric and Mage. Casting spells is kind of Will’s thing in the Party. Emmett doesn’t need to be doing Will’s job.

“Or a Wizard,” Mike says, finally settling at the head of the table.

“That sounds cool.” Emmett takes the paper with a smile and sits next to Mike. “Spells and magic and pointy hats, right? I’ll be that.”

As much as Will hated the idea at first, it’s a good thing they’re all playing D&D. If everyone else wasn’t absorbed in the campaign, they’d definitely be noticing how out of it he is.

Emmett’s character is a human Wizard named Jen. The Party picks him up at a tavern to “help them on their quest” - though he’s really more of a hinderance. Level One, after all. He’s basically dead weight.

Emmett is exceptionally bad at role-playing the dialogue. He’s too self-conscious about it, going red and mumbling, preferring to simply state that his character says something than to act through it. And he has to stop every two seconds to ask how to do something. Always confused which die to use, how to tally up his rolls.

Which is fine. Really. None of that is what bothers Will the most.

What bothers him the most is that now he *sees* it. Now he knows. And they don’t know that he knows. And he has no idea how he didn’t see it before. The little signs. The glances, the touches, the inside jokes. The energy between them. The rest of the Party doesn’t seem to notice a thing.

Of course they don't; they're not looking. They didn't see what Will saw - they don't know what he does. So when Mike scoots his chair a couple inches closer to Emmett's as their heads bend over Emmett's character sheet, nobody blinks an eye. When Emmett gazes at Mike with a little smile, watching him as Mike delivers a scene with practiced gusto, no one else seems to give it a second thought.

Mike is gay.

Will turns the thought over and over in his mind. He's been turning it, trying to polish it into a comfortable shape, for days. But the sharp little barbs won't smooth out. Mike is gay. Mike has been gay this whole time, and he never said anything. Why didn't he just say something? Why didn't *Will* ever say anything? It could've been... they could've... So many things could have been different.

Mike is gay. He likes boys. There's no other way to explain what Will saw. Is there? He tries to produce another explanation, but the encounter he observed was quite obviously *not* a shy, experimental venture. Mike was touching Emmett. And, based on what Will saw, he was *good* at it. Confident. And this was clearly a practiced interlude. Smooth. They snuck away, they hid, they fucked, they snuck back, no one was the wiser. A polished and seamless dance.

Will sits at the Henderson's oval dining table, sipping at his soda, tossing the dice when it's his turn, and he tries very hard not to hate Emmett. Well, he doesn't hate Emmett. Not exactly. Does he hate Emmett? He hates that Emmett is sitting beside Mike. In Will's traditional seat. He hates how often their eyes meet - the silent messages that pass between them. And Will, try as he might, can't stop looking at them. Especially when the Party breaks for intermission.

There's Mike - *his* Mike, who he's known since they were five, all earnestness and exuberance. Mike with his dark hair like rich soil and dark pines, eyes like black coffee. Mike in his sweaters, with notes on make-believe worlds scrawled in the margins of his notebooks, freckles sprinkled across his cheeks like a little galaxy.

And then there's Emmett, hair pale as sea foam, eyes the blue-gray of a stormy ocean. With a black guitar case slung on the back of his

chair and slim silver rings glinting at his lip and eyebrow, his jacket still carrying the faint scent of salt and rain - or maybe that's Will's imagination. They stand next to each other and they're opposites, dark and light, Emmett standing an inch over Mike in a way that makes Will's skin prickle.

Maybe he's just highly unused to seeing two boys in a relationship, in this world where that's just not something you see. Not out in the open, not in magazine pages, not in movies, not on television, not in books, not in classic art. So when you *do* see it, it's like seeing a two-dollar bill. It's something that makes you do a double-take. Anyone would be a little taken aback to suddenly find out that their best friend has a boyfriend. Maybe it's just that.

Or maybe Will is angry.

That's *his* Mike. And he knows he has no right, no *real* right, no stake or claim to him, but - that's - he - dammit, that's *Mike* ! That's his best friend, his partner in crime, his go-to, his... his...

And all at once, Will realizes just how *not over* Mike he is.

And he thinks, *oh, fuck*.

He thought he was. He was very proud of it, in fact. Look at him, recovered from his childhood puppy-love crush! Moving forward with his life, maturing, leaving the past behind, growing up. Good job, Will. You did it.

A few days ago he thought that if he just saw Mike with his new girlfriend, he'd be able to move on for good - maybe because that would prove, once and for all, that Will had no chance. But now this. Now Mike is holding out a mini cupcake to Emmett - tall, easygoing, awkward Emmett, good-looking in a plain, somewhat pinched way, with his bright smile and the occasional lilt to his inflections - and Emmett's nose is crinkling playfully as he licks the frosting off. And Will's blood is boiling.

Notes for the Chapter:

(Spongebob narrator voice) "Six... months... latair."

...

I have nothing to say for myself.

Let me know your thoughts? XD

Seriously though, especially because this fic is so structurally different than most of the byeler stuff I've written, I would love to know what you think.

Thanks for reading!

3. Halloween

Notes for the Chapter:

You may think that I gave Will my own Halloween costume. But no, the truth is much worse. I had planned this Halloween costume for Will months ago, and then copied it for myself in real life. That's how much of a nerd I am.

Special thanks to the-angry-pixie for being my costume department and soundtrack coordinator for this chapter.

“Does he *always* have to bring Emmett around?”

The words are hissed over the slice of greasy pizza that Will smuggled out of the cafeteria in a cocoon of equally greasy napkins. Students aren't supposed to take cafeteria food out of the cafeteria - not that anyone pays attention to that rule - and the Party didn't feel like eating in the school building today. It's one of those gray, endless school days where the sky is dark and low, and the classrooms are either freezing or boiling, and approximately fifteen hours have passed since first bell and it's still somehow only lunch time. No one was excited about the prospect of staying inside the godforsaken school building for any longer than absolutely necessary.

They're in the Sinclairs' van.

Not actually *going* anywhere - there aren't many places to go in Hawkins over lunch - just sitting. Parked on one end of the crumbling parking lot, watching halfhearted scraps of mist drag past the car. Droplets collect on the windows.

It's increasingly rare that they're all together for lunch. What with Dustin's profusion of clubs, Mike's friends from Drama, Will's proclivity to loiter in the art room whenever he can, Lucas and Max striking out on their own more often than not and El being generally unpredictable, the Party is often split during the lunch hour. But not today. Today the stars aligned, and for another glorious twenty seven minutes, none of them have to go anywhere.

It would be perfect if Mike was here. But he's MIA, and Will has a horrible feeling that he knows exactly what his best friend is up to.

Then again, Will isn't feeling great in general. Halloween is a bad time of year for him. But he pushed through without incident last year, and he's determined to do it again. He's not a kid anymore; he doesn't need anyone tiptoeing around smiling those too-casual smiles, watching him out of the corner of their eyes. Waiting for him to show any sign of beginning to crack.

General shrugs and expressions of indifference from the Party.

"He's not *always* around," Dustin says, leaning forward to see Will beyond El.

Lucas and Max, typically, have stretched out in the front seats, twisted to face backwards so they can talk to the others. Will, El, and Dustin occupy the back. Well, the middle. The wayback is empty. Normally, Mike and Will would be sitting in the wayback, with Mike trying to trace doodles or quotes into the fog on the rearview window.

"Yeah, he is," Will sniffs, dabbing grease off his pepperoni. "He was at lunch on Wednesday, and Mike just *had* to bring him along to the arcade last week, and -"

"To be fair, we did bump into him on the way."

"And Mike invited him to our *campaign*!"

Max, in the front passenger seat, rolls her eyes and swallows her bite of apple. "That was one time, Will, are you still mad about that? It's been weeks." She slides a thumbnail into the skin of her apple, turning it, idly slicing out a perfect circle and peeling it out. She examines the resulting nail-sized circle of white in the otherwise red fruit. "He is kind of annoying, though."

Will gestures. "Thank you!"

"He can be a little hard to swallow," Dustin rephrases diplomatically, and Will glances at him. Wondering what he means. Wondering, for the gazillionth time - *does that Party know? Not about Mike, but about*

Emmett? Have they seen the pin and put two and two together? Do they know ? And if they do, what do they think?

What do they think about people like that?

What would they think of me?

When Will zones back in half a moment later, the conversation is still on Mike's new "friend" from Biology.

"I don't drink soda because it has too much sugar and it's bad for your teeth," Lucas pipes up in an exaggerated imitation of Emmett's inflections. *"Do you have diet soda? I'm too cool for your regular soda, I have to drink diet."*

Sniggers here and there. The impression is surprisingly accurate - and maybe just a little mean.

"I have to carry my guitar around everywhere, because how else will people know that I'm a wannabe rockstar?"

"Oh, my god," Max hiccups, covering her mouth to avoid spraying everyone with half-chewed apple as she laughs. "That sounds exactly like him."

"Because that's how he talks," Will says. He ignores El's nudge of warning, pushing on now that he has a sympathetic crowd to vent his frustrations. " *All the time.*"

That's not strictly true. Emmett's speech turns much more bland and monotone when they're at school, or around potentially judgmental adults. His personality emerges in safer circumstances. It's something Will hates to admit that he can relate to. The façade. Allotting only *this* much of his real self to emerge under these circumstances, and *that* much under *those* circumstances, and a bit more around friends, and a different slice of the pie graph of his personality on Wednesdays and Fridays after 9pm. Who knows how much? Who would suspect? Who can he bare his soul to, and who can only see as far as his skin? Who knows him, but only in a good mood? When does he need to playact the good student, the aloof artist, the girl-obsessed teenage guy? It's exhausting.

The difference, Will tells himself, is that Emmett isn't in the closet. Not really. *He* gets to walk around with chipped nail polish and a rainbow pin only half-hidden under his lapel. *He* gets to have a boyfriend. And go on dates and get kisses and snuggle with someone and make out and flirt. Must be fucking nice.

He shouldn't, but he opens his mouth again. He's on a roll now and it feels good to voice what's been going around and around in his head. "He's probably not even that good at guitar. Oh, and his music taste? Sucks. He keeps trying to start conversations with me about bands as if I'm ever going to listen to -"

He registers it a half second before it happens. For about the past five seconds, everyone's eyes have moved past him, to the car window. Just before he turns his head, there's a knock.

Guess who?

Will, El and Dustin have to clamber into the wayback to make room for the new arrivals. Will hunkers down in the middle seat, face warm, wondering just how much of that was audible through the car windows. But if Emmett heard anything, he doesn't show it. He's all smiles as he and Mike climb into the middle seat and shut the door behind them, laughing, their ears and noses and fingers red from cold.

It's fine.

Really, it's fine. Will wanted Mike to be here, and now he is. The Party is all together. They shoot inside jokes back and forth in increasingly complex and self-referential webs. They share food. They complain about homework and substitute teachers -

"I mean, come on, I'm not allowed to go to the bathroom? It's ten steps down the hallway, it's not like I'm gonna get lost."

- and it's fine.

"Edgar, no, " Mike is laughing at something Emmett said. "Edgar, why are you so sad? Stop being so sad."

" But the stick would not stop," Emmett intones, cryptically, and Mike

nearly falls over laughing.

An inside joke. They already have inside jokes.

Fantastic.

Will tries not to be sullen. He really does. He even begins to succeed as he's drawn into a heated debate over which movie apocalypse would be the most fun to live in - and then Emmett offers Mike half of his tuna fish sandwich.

Mike hates tuna fish. Mike has always hated tuna fish. And Will can't help but feel a little bit smug when Mike makes a doubtful face at the half a sandwich being held in his direction.

Then Mike shrugs. "Sure," he says, and trades Emmett half the tuna fish sandwich (on *wheat* bread - goddamn *wheat* bread!) for half of his own PB + J - an old favorite that Mike never quite outgrew.

You're his boyfriend, Will thinks venomously, biting into the last of his own greasy pizza. *You should know that Mike thinks tuna fish tastes like mermaid vomit. You're supposed to know things like that.*

Mike takes a tentative bite of the corner of the sandwich, and to Will's horror-slash-amazement, his expression brightens. He looks at Emmett.

"It's good," he says, surprised, and Emmett laughs.

"I told you. Mayonnaise, relish, and lemon juice. Works miracles."

I can cook too, Will thinks dejectedly, sliding a little further down in the seat so that he doesn't have to watch them anymore. *I can make shepherd's pie. And brownies.*

"Are you gonna cut it out? You're being ridiculous," El hisses in his ear, pinching his arm, and he elbows her away. "Mike throws enough tantrums. Now you, too?"

"El. Not now."

"Yes now." She hunkers down further, pulling him into a dusty

corner of the backseat to whisper. “You’re being weird.”

He shrugs and stares off towards the front of the van, pretending to listen to Max talk about *Freedom Fighters* .

“Spill.” She jostles him, and when that doesn’t work, she leans her cheek on his shoulder and pouts. Her eyes grow serious after a moment of studying him. “Is it about Mike?”

“What are we whispering about?” Mike is hanging over the back of the seats, grinning at them. “I heard my name. You guys gossiping about me?”

“Might be, might not,” El says, and puts her entire palm over his face to push him back to his own seat.

He pops back a moment later. “Come listen, Emmett was gonna give a demonstration.”

No.

“Demonstration of what?” Dustin says, disengaging from his debate with Max, but Will just sits up with grim certainty.

And sure enough, there’s the head of an acoustic guitar sticking up beside Emmett’s shoulder. White plastic pegs, silvery strings, dark wood.

Oh, no.

Emmett shakes a pick out from the hollow depths of the instrument, then arranges it on his lap as best he can in the confined space and starts tuning it, seeming a little embarrassed by Mike’s repetitions of, “He’s really good, just wait.”

“I’m not that good,” Emmett says after the third time, and Mike scoffs. “I’m still learning.”

“Whatever.” Mike sits criss-cross-applesauce on the opposite side of the middle seats, back braced against the door, facing his boyfriend. Grinning. Proud.

Emmett finishes tuning and gives a few preparatory strums. "Right." He clears his throat. "Well, what should I...?"

"Halloween," Mike suggests. "You should play something for Halloween."

"Oh, right," Will says, "That's tomorrow." As if he wasn't hyper-aware of it. Like he is every year - always just waiting for that other shoe to drop, for everything to start all over again. *Anniversary effect*, they call it in the doctors' office.

He knows Mike is looking at him, trying to scan his face, decipher his expression, but he pretends not to notice.

"Halloween," Emmett echoes, drumming his fingers on the body of the instrument as he thinks. "Hm."

He positions his fingers. Will can't help but sit forward, curious.

Will knows what it is before the first bar is done. The intro is a little wobbly, a little off-beat, but then he gets into the main riff and the Party chuckles and exclaims in appreciation, because of course. Of course he had to play *Ghostbusters*.

"*If there's something strange*," Dustin sings, badly, and the whole group joins in, "*In your neighborhood. Who you gonna call?*"

The worst part is, he's not even that bad.

No. No, actually, the *worst* part is that looking at Emmett - watching his fingers move up and down the fretboard, watching his hair flop over his narrow face as he concentrates - Will understands. He understands what Mike sees in him.

"*Ghostbusters!*"

"So, what are you doing tomorrow?"

They're on their way back to the school building, drifting their separate ways, not looking forward to the other half of the school day. It takes Will a moment to realize that Mike was talking to him.

“Huh?”

“ *Huh?* ” Mike imitates, and shoves him gently. “Wake up there, Rocketman. Come back to earth. What are you doing for Halloween?”

“Oh. You know.” He hefts his backpack with a toss of his head. “Nothing. Probably just handing out candy with my mom.” He laughs, trying to make it sound less pathetic than it is. “It’ll be fun. We’ll watch some scary movies or something.”

Normally he and Mike would already have plans - but Mike hasn’t said anything about it this year.

Mike makes a *Mike-face* , but he won’t push the issue. Will knows he won’t - not about Halloween.

Emmett isn’t dumb. He can clearly tell there’s something unsaid here, something understood but unspoken hanging in the air between the two of them. From his place on the other side of Mike, he looks back and forth between them. He catches Mike’s eye, makes some sort of expression, then looks back to Will.

“Hey, uh, you wanna come with us?”

“Come with you,” Will echoes, his tone flat with surprise, and it sounds much more acidic than he intended it to. He tries again: “Come where?”

“Trick-or-treating,” Mike says, and Will snorts.

“You’re going trick-or-treating?”

“ *Holly* is going trick-or-treating. *We* are chaperoning.”

“Doesn’t your mom usually take her?”

Will’s eyes meet Mike’s and he understands at once. *Parents fighting, Mom’s not in the mood, Holly’s anxious because Mom’s anxious, not a good idea.*

“Not this year,” is all Mike says.

“And there’s a party afterwards,” Emmett adds. He nudges Mike. “Who’s house is it?”

“Emmy’s.”

Will’s eyebrows shoot towards his hairline. “Emmeline Stevens?”

Mike turns a little red.

Will laughs in disbelief. “How the hell did you get an invite to *that* ?”

Mike launches into an explanation - something about the SGA and the drama club working together to advertise this semester’s play, he and Emmeline got to talking over posters, etcetera.

Before Mike can get off on a tangent about the play, Emmett cuts in, “So, you’ll come?”

Faced with both of their expectant faces, Will doesn’t have much choice.

Why did he agree to this?

He feels stupid. He *looks* stupid.

Actually, he thought he looked pretty good, all things considered. It’s a last-minute costume, cobbled together out of what he had in his wardrobe, but it came together well, if he does say so himself. He even spent a few minutes at home standing in front of the mirror, admiring his handiwork from different angles.

His chest puffed up just the slightest bit when Mike opened the door, looked him over, and smiled big enough to show teeth. “Hey,” Mike said, stepping back to let him in. “That looks great.”

He felt great. It was shaping up to be a fun evening after all... that is, until he registered what Mike was wearing.

Mike and Emmett are skeletons. Tight black jeans, black shoes, close-fitting black sweatshirts, with white “bones” cut out of felt and glued on. More “bones” painted onto the backs of their hands and fingers.

They hustle Will into the Wheelers' guest bathroom to proudly display the glow-in-the-dark paint outlining the bones. As a final touch, they pull the hoods of the sweatshirts up. Two lithe, gently glowing skeletons in the dark, waving their arms in the mirror and laughing.

But that's not all. Oh, no. The tight-fitting pants do absolute *wonders* for Mike's ass, Will can't help but notice, but that's not what made his jaw drop when he first saw Mike.

They don't just have skeletal bodies. Their faces, too, are painted. Ghoulish black-and-white skeleton stage makeup. Eyes, noses, and the hollows of their cheeks blacked out in sharply contoured shadow, the rest of their skin paper-white. Lines painted over their lips and at the sides of their mouths to represent a skeletal grin.

Camouflaged into the design of the facepaint is more than a hint of eyeliner.

The effect, overall, is sharp and exotic, and Will kind of can't believe how good Mike looks in eye makeup. It's subtle, blending into the deep hollows of his "skull," but it's there.

This clearly wasn't a last-minute costume decision. *They* didn't spend part of the afternoon hunting around the house for pieces of clothing to cobble together into something passable. They might have been planning this for weeks.

Will almost hates it. He *wants* to hate it, because not only do they both look *good*, but they look good *together*. A pair. A matching set. And here's Will dressed as Marty McFly, in jeans and an orange vest over a denim jacket and a white plaid button-up, wearing Walkman headphones around his neck, a watch, aviators, sneakers, suspenders. Hair styled with gel, intentionally messy. The whole shebang. He thought he looked good, earlier - he still does - but he feels out of place next to the two matching skeletons beside him, in their slim black jeans and face paint and black hoodies, white "bones" glued over their clothes.

"Wiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

A seven year old slams into him, nearly sending him careening.

“Holly Miss Jolly! Wow, your costume! That is so cool, look at that! Give us a spin.”

She twirls obligingly.

“Alien queen?” Will guesses.

“Princess Alien,” says Mrs. Wheeler’s voice from the staircase. She descends with a big *I-have-to-look-cheerful-for-company* smile on her face and a camera in her hands. “She couldn’t decide between the two.”

Holly proudly bops around the living room in a big purple dress over a day-glo green alien suit. An orange pumpkin-head candy bucket knocks against her knees. “Hallow-een, Hallow-een, Hallow-een,” she sings.

Will ruffles her hair and she jerks out of the way with an indignant cry of, “Stop, I just fixed it!”

“You know,” he says, kneeling to fix the curls he rumbled, “the queen is the most powerful. Without her, there’d be no swarm, and the aliens would never get to take over any planets at all.”

Holly gapes, and then she *glows*. She spins to face her mother. “I changed my mind. I’m not the Princess Alien, I’m the Alien Queen. Oh, hi, Emmett! You look very pretty today.”

“As long as we don’t need any more costume adjustments,” Mrs. Wheeler sighs, at the same time that Emmett chuckles, “Thanks, Holly.”

“Aw, Mom, no,” Mike gripes, catching sight of the camera, and Mrs. Wheeler snags him with a practiced grip on his shoulder.

“Just a few,” she says, batting a hand at Will. “Come on, Will, you too. Get in there. You all look so adorable. Okay. Mike, smile. *Smile*. Okay, ready? Say, *trick-or-treat!* ”

The flash goes off - *boom*.

Boom, boom, boom.

The music reverberates in the cage of Will's ribs.

Everyone shouts to hear one another. A muddle of scents overlap in the too-warm air. Perfumes, colognes, cheap alcohol, chips and dip, wax and smoke from the decorative candles. Will keeps expecting somebody to knock over a candle or set fire to their costume any second, but thus far, it hasn't happened.

There are a lot of Robocops milling around this year. Several ninja, with varying degrees of adherence to the stealth code. Vampires, policemen, at least two Princess Leias, one Indiana Jones, some zombies, Madonna, several witches. Will has been keeping an eye on a guy in a varsity jacket and jeans, trying to figure out if he was abandoned by the other four members of the Breakfast Club or if he just didn't bother dressing up.

Because, hey, at least crowd watching is entertaining and doesn't make him want to punch something.

This is one of the biggest parties of the year. The Stevens are a popular family - before Emmeline joined Student Government, her older brother was Prom King. Not a year goes by that they don't host a Halloween party, an end-of-school party, a Fourth of July party. Big, expensive house in the well-to-do corner of town; half the school population crammed into one building; plenty of alcohol. What could go wrong?

"You have whole *worlds* in there -" Emmett taps Mike's head. "- like whole, complete other *worlds*, with maps and histories and people with entire backstories and personalities and minds of their own, and -"

He takes another sip from the red plastic cup in his hand. He's not slurring, but he's clearly *just* on this side of tipsy. His gestures are big and enthusiastic, nearly spilling his punch onto the couch they're all sitting on.

Will sips his own punch. Perched on the arm of the couch beside

them, trying to cultivate an expression of detached enjoyment. *Yeah, great party. Fun time. I'm having fun. Not so much fun that I want to get up and go talk to all these people I don't know, but fun.* In front of them, balloons drift around on the floor and against the ceiling, black and orange party streamers twist from corner to corner, and cheesy Halloween decorations fill every inch of space. Ghosts and goblins, witches on broomsticks, Frankenstein's monster, black cats, gravestones with puns on them. *Ima Goner. Rigg R. Mortise. She always said her feet were killing her - now we believe her!* And, of course, skeletons.

Will knows that Mike writes. He knew that, didn't he? Mike has been writing short stories since they were kids. Fantasy-adventure stuff, usually - or at least, it was. Years ago. Is it still, or does he write other things now? Has it really been years since Will has read any of Mike's stories? More importantly, has it really been years since Mike *offered* to let Will read his stories? Why? They used to share that kind of stuff. They used to be each other's sounding boards.

"- and you just *made* that. You wanted it to exist, and you just -" Emmett clicks his fingers and makes a hissing sound, as if summoning something out of thin air. "*Fsst*, made it. You just made it exist. You just *thought* it into existence, and now it's this whole other universe that other people can read about and go into with their *minds*, and - how is that not the coolest thing ever? That is fucking amazing. Do *not* bullshit me with that *it's nothing special* crap. You're a magical fucking creature."

He bops Mike on the nose with the word *fucking* and Mike's lashes flutter as he blinks a few times, surprised by the touch and then bashful as he grins. He tries to hide it by looking at his shoes, his hair falling into his face.

"That's how writing works, dumbass," he laughs, but his smile is warm when he looks back up at Emmett.

Will turns back to people-watching.

It's been like this all night. Ever since they arrived, he's been drifting around awkwardly behind Mike and Emmett, pretending he's having fun. At least while they were trick-or-treating he had Holly to talk to,

so he didn't feel like quite such a third wheel.

"I was working in the lab late one night," Bobby Pickett croons from the supercharged speakers, and bodies stream towards the center of the huge living-room-turned-dance-floor as partygoers recognize the familiar silly song. *"When my eyes beheld an eerie sight..."*

Oh, mistake. Looking back at Mike was a mistake. Will was going to make some comment about the song, but when he turns he gets an eyeful of Mike reaching out to tuck an errant sprig of white-blond hair back into Emmett's hood. Emmett has kept his hood up despite the heat of the party, staunchly upholding the desired effect of the costume. Mike, on the other hand, got too hot as soon as they arrived and pushed his hood back, his shaggy curl-waves standing out around his head. The gesture is just innocuous enough to slip under the radar - and yet, his fingertip lingers on Emmett's temple for just a moment too long.

That's it.

Will can't take any more of this.

He tilts his cup back, chugging the last of his punch, slams down the cup on a side table, stands, and thrusts out a hand towards Mike.

What he means to say is, *Hey, listen, it's Monster Mash. Do you wanna go dance, just for shits and giggles? C'mon, it'll be like when we were kids.*

But when Mike looks up at him with his lined eyes and sharp-contoured cheekbones, which over his already angular face make him look either princely or sickly, Will forgets how to talk for a second.

He blurts, "Uh - I... *Dyouwandance* ?"

"What?" Mike yells, leaning forward.

Will's pulse flutters in his throat like a hummingbird, and a fine mist of sweat is just beginning to rise at his temples and hairline. Too late to turn back now.

Maybe that punch was a little stronger than he thought, or maybe he's just so *sick* of seeing those dark eyes turned towards *Emmett*,

because Will grabs Mike's sweaty hands in his own and pulls him up off the couch. "Come dance with me."

Mike balks. Uncertain, hesitant. This is weird - this isn't something they normally do, and they both know it. "Will, you know I'm a terrible dancer."

Will quirks an eyebrow. "It's *Monster Mash*, Michael, not the Shostakovich Waltz No. 2." His confidence falters and he drops Mike's hands, looking down to mumble, "Well, look, we don't have to..."

"No, I -"

Mike seems to teeter. He looks questioningly back at Emmett, who salutes them with his solo cup.

"Hey, don't drag me into this. I'm an awful dancer. My moves are deadly. No, really - I'd die." He stands, just a little unsteadily, and stretches like a cat. "I was gonna go find some snacks, anyway, and maybe scout out a bathroom. Meet you in five?"

That seems to do it. With this blessing, Mike shrugs and lets Will lead him towards the middle of the room.

Will's heart is pounding so hard it hurts. The world feels wobbly and unreal with adrenaline. What is he doing? What is he *doing*?

Will's nerves do not go unnoticed by his best friend. "You doing okay?" Mike says, ducking his head to be heard over the noise, speaking almost directly into Will's ear.

He squirms away, a hot little worm of excitement lighting up unbidden in his belly at the feeling of Mike's breath on his ear. "I'm fine, Mike," he snaps.

"Are you sure? We can go home if y-"

"I said I'm fine."

"Okay, well, you just seem..." Mike chews on a piece of dry skin on his lip, smudging the chalky makeup of his skeleton grin. The

unspoken words are there: *weird. You're acting weird.*

Will flounders, caught in the act, and then catches ahold of a life raft: a near-truth. "I'm just bored." There's a childish pout sneaking into his voice, and he's still bitter enough about Mr. Guitar Genius that he doesn't bother suppressing it. "Am I not allowed to have fun with my best friend on Halloween? I've barely talked to you."

Mike's brows crinkle up. "We've been talking all evening," he says, sounding genuinely puzzled.

"Look, are we gonna dance, or...?" Will trails a hand towards the crowd, doubt creeping in again. "Are we just gonna stand here on the edge of the dance floor like middle school wallflowers?"

"They did the mash," the speakers announce. *"They did the monster mash!"*

And they do.

And for a few minutes - just a couple minutes - it's perfect.

They're being stupid. Just having fun. Flailing their limbs around, laughing until they snort, bumping into each other and other people, doing dumb dance moves. The Robot. Walk Like An Egyptian. Oh God Bees, So Many Bees. The Shopping Cart. Underwater. Oh God The Bees Are Back. The Sprinkler.

The song is almost over and they've somehow worked their way from the edge of the room towards the middle, the crowd closing in behind them to swallow them up, but Will doesn't mind.

Mike speaks up suddenly. "You know, you... look good."

Will barely has enough self-control not to snap his head up and stare at him. Is he joking? No... that wasn't Mike's joking-voice. Will loses the beat of the song entirely, lost for a moment. "I - thanks, I guess. I feel like I look stupid -"

"You don't look stupid -"

"It was really last-minute -"

“It looks good though.”

“But I mean, you! Look at you. *You* look good. You look...” He looks Mike up and down - wow, that punch *was* stronger than he expected - and maybe it's his imagination, but he thinks he hears Mike's breath hitch. “You look really good.”

Something shifts. *Monster Mash* is over, but another song has already started to fade in. The temperature seems about fifteen degrees warmer in the crowd, and on a snap decision, Will peels off his vest and denim jacket, balls them up, and tosses them over the crowd in the vague direction of the couch.

“Too hot,” he says by way of explanation, but he's not sure Mike heard him. The music *thumps* in his eardrums, drowning out almost everything else. It's a miracle Hop hasn't been called on a noise complaint yet.

It's *Never Let Me Down Again* by Depeche Mode playing now, and more vaguely-tipsy dancers pour into the huge living room by the second. The crush of bodies forces them into each other's space; they couldn't take a step back if they wanted to.

“I'm taking a ride with my best friend,” the vocals come in over the smooth, racing-heart-beat of the music. *“I hope he never lets me down again. He knows where he's taking me. Taking me where I want to be. I'm taking a ride with my best friend.”*

In the semi-darkness, it's easy to forget the rest of the world. And Will is happy to forget.

They're surrounded by dancing couples. Most of the singles and groups are closer to the edges; here, the crowd is thick, elbows everywhere, a girl's wig flicking Will on the cheek as she spins. Couples bobbing, popping and locking, working up a sweat.

“We're flying high. We're watching the world pass us by. Never want to come down, never want to put my feet back down on the ground.”

By the time the song starts to wind down, Will is getting out of breath. Starting to laugh a little - stumbling as somebody bumps into

him, steadying himself against Mike's shoulder. Suddenly, acutely aware that they haven't been Silly Dancing for several minutes but *really* dancing, borne to the center of the dimly lit living-room-turned-dance-floor by the shifting throng of bodies, lost and unnoticed in the crowd, half-blinded by the low light and the whirling flash and sparkle of the disco balls that have been strung up in each corner, a flashlight trained on each so that the room is alive with shivering, darting, spinning points of illusory light -

He takes a deep breath to steady himself, unbuttoning his cuffs and hastily rolling his sleeves to the elbows. Mike is going to step away now. He'll realize how long they've been on the floor, or he'll realize how close they are, and he'll gently disengage himself. He'll smile, say he had fun, and go look for his boyfriend.

Except that he doesn't.

Except that they haven't moved, or rather they're *still* moving, and the next song comes on with two bell-like notes which slide into the opening line, harsh, loud - "*Reach out and touch faith* -" and the throb of the guitar riff crashes through the air -

Whoever's DJing must be a Depeche Mode fan, because now it's *Personal Jesus* starting up. A heavier, darker, pulsing song, pounding through them, reverberating through the cages of their ribs. And instead of stepping away, Will swears that Mike steps closer. And when Will tilts his head back just a degree, he meets his best friend's eyes - so dark and dilated from the dim light that they appear solid black, no pupil and no iris, just deep-dark pools that reflect the storm of disco ball lights.

There's something in Mike's eyes that makes Will's whole body go taut.

They're dancing, again, still, but they're not playing anymore. No more half-embarrassed grins, no more exaggerated goofy movements - all of that is gone. They don't have much room for big exaggerated dance moves, anyway, not in this crowd. They're invisible in the anonymous crush, breathing in the thick heat of sweat and perfumes and alcohol-punch.

They've barely said a word since *Monster Mash*, and that suits Will just fine. He's not good at words. Words might shatter this, might ruin it. He just wants to live it, for as long as he can, greedily gobbling it up with a fierce, blood-burning kind of excitement-satisfaction. He wants to remember all of it. He wants to *absorb* all of it, make it a part of himself.

How Mike's makeup makes him look strange and exotic and sharp in the dim party lighting. His features, as familiar as Will's own reflection, turned alien and startling. The glow-in-the-dark touches on his costume stark and white-neon-green in the shadows. How they're in each other's space, close enough for Will to smell Mike's cologne, and he suddenly wonders if Mike can smell *his*, too - if it's just as novel-familiar to Mike as it is to him -

And Will is painfully, acutely aware that *Mike likes boys*, Mike is attracted to boys, Mike might just be attracted to *Will* - especially tonight, when Will is all suave and done-up in his Marty McFly costume -

- how their faces have ended up close, very close, when did they get that close -?

- how Will can feel the cloud of body heat around Mike's torso -

- how they start moving together - not just dancing in proximity to each other but dancing *with* each other - bobbing, swaying, and stepping, pulsing to the beat -

- how Will doesn't know when or why it happens, really, but suddenly he realizes that their belt buckles are almost touching, and he reaches out in a moment of dizziness, not enough oxygen in his body, his hand landing on Mike's hip. And Mike, in response, tilts into the touch. Bearing forward on the next beat, *almost* - but not quite - grinding against the cradle of Will's hips.

Suddenly, fervently, Will wishes he'd do it again. For real this time. He wants - irrationally, desperately, he *wants* - to throw caution to the wind and wind his arms around Mike's torso, pulling him flush against his own body. They're almost there. It would be so easy. One rush of insane courage, one moment of madness. One shift of weight,

one hand shoved up into the sweat-damp wild curls at the back of Mike's head and they'd be kissing.

Will hasn't kissed anyone since eighth grade. It was Samantha Elwood - a perfectly nice, if a bit blunt and tone-deaf girl who had the misfortune of dating Will for several months. He tried to like her. He really did. Of course, it hadn't worked. Their first and last kiss had been shy, clumsy, and completely underwhelming.

There must be some cruel irony in the fact that Will once kissed a girl and felt nothing except for stomach-shredding nerves and the warm-damp touch of her lips, but now, just *thinking* about kissing Mike, his knees have gone a little weak and his whole chest aches with a sharp, sweet, undeniable urgency.

Mike, Mike, Mike.

Drifting in his half-fevered delirium, Will tries to remember the last time he and Mike were this physically... well, *intimate*. *Close* doesn't seem like the right word. They're close all the time. Leaning against each other, tussling, in each other's space. But not like this.

This is different.

Mike is different, somehow. Mike, who is generally so avoidant of anything qualifying as *strenuous physical activity*. Mike, the awkward, bullheaded, kind dork that Will knows as his best friend. But this? This is a side of Mike Will doesn't think he's seen before. This Mike is breathing hard, but not slowing down. This Mike is someone intense, and gorgeous, and focused - dare he say, confident - and almost dangerous.

Okay. Will likes a little danger. Game on.

Kiss me, Will thinks. He even tilts his head back another centimeter, leveling his gaze at Mike's. *Kiss me. I'm right here.*

Of course, they can't. They're in public, in the middle of the crowd, and the song is ending with one last string of instrumentals.

And Will isn't Mike's boyfriend.

The spell breaks so abruptly it could almost be comical. Mike blinks, pulls back just half a centimeter, and from there it's a lightning-swift domino effect. Will cringes back like he was zapped, Mike looks away as if embarrassed, the song hums to an end, and they're left standing, stiffly, in the middle of the dance floor.

"I should -" Mike is saying, but Will is already moving away.

"Right, yeah."

"Sorry, I just -"

"No, yeah, I -"

They babble nonsensically over each other, both trying to act casual as they drift to the edge of the room. Distractedly, Will looks for his jacket. His hands are shaking. That was, perhaps, the closest he's ever come to wordlessly outing himself, and the delayed-reaction muted terror is beginning to set in. He doesn't even know why it matters anymore. It shouldn't, right? Not with Mike. Clearly, Mike isn't going to judge him for his... preferences. And yet that instinct of self-preservation, of secrecy, is so deeply ingrained that his stomach is in slippery knots, the aftershock of what *almost* happened making him sick.

Mike, meanwhile, stands with his hands shoved in his pockets. He looks as guilty as a dog with stolen food all over its face. No doubt thinking about how he left his boyfriend all alone for nearly fifteen minutes and danced with someone else.

Another old instinct is rising, one that's just as hard to deny:

Run.

"I, uh," Will mumbles, finally locating his jacket and vest and throwing them on again. "I need some air."

And with that he makes his escape.

That was way too close.

Mike lifts his hair from the back of his neck as he walks, breathing out a hard puff of breath. Trying to cool down. He almost scrubbed his hands over his face until, at the last fraction of a second, he remembered the makeup.

He can't do this to Will. It isn't right.

What's that old saying? If you love something, let it go?

Yeah, he said it. He said the L word. Or - *thought* it, at least. He may be a moron, and it may have taken him several years to figure out, but he managed it eventually. The process was just... rough. After all, admitting to himself that he had a crush on his best friend meant admitting to himself that he crushed on *guys*.

But really, admitting the L-word was almost easier than admitting to a crush. Saying *that* word seems as natural as the muscle memory of walking to Will's house. Of course he loves Will; he's Mike's closest friend. Always has been, probably always will be. Aren't they practically brothers? More than brothers? Mike will probably carry some level of platonic devotion to him until the day he dies. They've been integral parts of each other's lives for as long as he can remember; anything else is unthinkable.

But Mike also knows that there's no chance of anything ever happening.

Not only is Will straight - Mike is his *best friend*, he would *know* by now if Will wasn't, Will would have said something - but after everything Will went through as a kid, all the bullying, there's no way he'd want anything to do with Mike's "unnatural homosexual tendencies."

So Mike - like a somewhat tragic hero in a story, as he consoles himself - is resigned to pine from afar and move on.

Or, at least, that was the plan. And he was getting along very well, if he does say so himself, until -

Until that dance. Until, in the middle of the dance floor, Mike suddenly became aware of just how all-over Will he was. *Shit*. There's

no way in hell Will didn't notice. There's no *way* he didn't realize that Mike wasn't just playing around. Shit, shit, shit, *shit*. Was he making Will uncomfortable that whole time? Fuck, Mike had practically groped him! Was Will just too polite to say anything, willing to keep his mouth shut and indulge Mike in whatever the hell he thought he was doing? He didn't *seem* uncomfortable, so Mike hadn't thought that -

He stops so suddenly that a girl runs into him, sloshing her drink a little.

"Hey," she complains, halfheartedly, and he mumbles back a dry-mouthed, "Sorry."

A brief, delicious moment of stomach-fluttering doubt. A *what if*.

What if Mike had been right? What if Will *wasn't* uncomfortable? What if Mike hadn't been imagining it, hadn't been projecting - what if Will actually *was* as into that as Mike was?

The moment ends as soon as it begins, and Mike shakes his head, *hard*, continuing along his aimless trajectory. There's a big difference between enjoying a somewhat risqué dance with a friend and actually being *into* that friend. Will just likes dancing, that's all. God, what was Mike thinking? Getting all touchy-feely with Will like that. Will got enough shit about seeming queer when he was a kid - what is Mike trying to do, start up those rumors all over again? Make his best friend's life hell again? And -

With a sick jolt, Mike remembers. His boyfriend. He has a boyfriend. God. Emmett said he was going to find snacks, and that was - what, three or four songs ago? And what has Mike been doing in the meantime? Dancing with someone else. God, he's an idiot. A big, stupid, selfish idiot that somehow managed to make his best friend uncomfortable and his boyfriend lonely and sad, *at the same time*.

Stupid Mike. Stupid, stupid, *stupid* Mike.

He has got to get it in check. He's got to get himself under control.

Mike makes a decision, then and there. He is going to enjoy this

party. He is going to have fun. He is going to spend time with his boyfriend, and if Will is at all interested in being around him again after *that*, he's going to make sure that Will has fun, too. He's not going to embarrass his best friend any further. He's going to be perfectly friendly, perfectly normal, and perfectly platonic, with absolutely no untoward advances. It's going to be a good fucking Halloween.

And that's that.

The screen door opens with a screech and closes with a bang. The back porch is quiet, removed. This house faces a wide, well-trafficked street which, two hours ago, was doubtless swarming with trick-or-treaters, but the backyard is deserted. At this time of the year, the pool is empty and covered, and the Stevens' big back porch offers no view other than some stately maple-beeches and the backs of other houses. The cold air on his overheated face is like a slap of freezing water, and he relishes it. Out here, he's actually glad to have the jacket.

He stalks across the length of the porch, seeking the corner farthest from the door, and braces his elbows on the railing. Rakes his hair back from his face with both hands. Sighs. The beat and melody of the party music is still audible, but muffled, leaving only the bassey undertones of song to filter through the night.

Shit.

"Hey, McFly."

Will has a heart attack.

Nearly.

Clutching his chest, he glares into the dark corner that just spoke to him. He's frustrated, he's tired, he just went through emotional whiplash, he's high-strung, and on top of it all, he's still fighting down a wave of stubborn arousal. He is absolutely not in the mood for any kind of fuckery.

The perpetrator's hands pop up in mock-surrender. "Don't shoot! I'm an innocent bystander."

On second glance, he's not nearly as well-hidden as Will first thought. Will was just so absorbed in his own thoughts that he walked right past the guy taking a smoke break on the porch.

On third glance, Will realizes: it's not a stranger. It's Mildly Arrogant Theater Guy. The senior who Will spent a bit of time puzzling over earlier this semester because he genuinely couldn't tell if the guy was flirting or if that was just how he acted with everyone. He hasn't really thought about it in weeks.

Will doesn't feel too bad about not recognizing him for a second there. They've talked, now and again, but they're barely acquaintances. And anyway, Theater Guy - what's his name? He played Hamlet, Will remembers that - isn't exactly in everyday school garb tonight. His dark hair is combed back with enough gel to make it gleam, and despite the chill, he's wearing nothing but light-wash jeans and a white tank top. His fake mustache, while obviously a tad worse for the wear after an evening of heavy partying, succeeds in making him look a little older than he is.

"Hey, Freddie," Will responds dryly. He turns around to lean back on the porch railing, facing his unexpected conversation partner.

Theo - that's his name, Theo - lifts a triumphant fist to the air and an invisible microphone to his mouth in a more-than-passable imitation of Freddie Mercury. "Ay-oh," he half-sings in greeting, then grins. Pleased with himself.

The invisible mic points towards Will.

"No."

"C'mon."

"I'm not in the mood."

"C'mooooon."

Will snorts, but smiles. "Ay-oh yourself."

He's content to leave it there, letting silence take over again as his racing heart calms. But he can feel Theo's eyes on him. When he looks back, Theo is taking a drag from his cigarette, sighing out a cloud of smoke, white and swirling in the damp, keen October air. It's a different brand than what Will's mother smokes; he can smell it, familiar-alien, from here.

"Smoke?"

"Oh -" Caught off guard, Will looks down at the pack being held in his direction.

Theo cocks his head. "Never tried?"

"If you met my mother, that wouldn't be a question."

He considers. After tonight, maybe -

But isn't that the kind of thinking that gave his own mother a deep, wheezing cough that's only worsened over the years? And anyway, he *has* tried it before, and it always makes him feel sick and lightheaded. And on top of everything, he doesn't want the headache.

He shakes his head minutely and Theo snaps the paper flap back down. "Suit yourself." The pack goes back in his jeans pocket. He seems intent on making conversation, despite Will's sullen glare. "So what's got you so not-in-the-mood?"

"Life," Will says flatly. He doesn't plan on elaborating, but can't help mumbling, "Oh, nothing, you know. It's just a lot of fun when your friends run off and leave you so they can make out or some shit." He's editing the truth, rounding off the sharpest edges and erecting veils to mask the most incriminating details. "It's fine. I kind of thought Halloween was supposed to be *our* thing, but -" He lifts his arms, face twisting in a dry, acidic smile, then lets them drop. "Whatever."

Halloween *is* supposed to be their thing. They always spend Halloween together. Even when the Party started going their separate ways every other year or so, Mike and Will always had plans together. Ever since that one Halloween in particular, sitting in the

Wheeler's basement with candy strewn over the table in front of them, matching in beige coveralls. Wasn't that their agreement? *Together* ? Crazy *together* ?

He paces a few feet down the porch, then turns around and comes back, deciding he's not done. "And you know what's bullshit? You know what's bullshit? The fact that we've known each other for - for -" God, he is a little tipsy. Not only is he ranting to this near-stranger, but he's having trouble calculating. "Since *kindergarten*, and here I am being passed up for somebody who makes tuna fish sandwiches on *wheat bread!*"

Theo watches this outburst with what might be a hint of amusement, but he sounds genuine when Will lapses into silence and he makes a face of sympathy. "Sucks, dude."

"Yeah." Will settles against the railing again. Anger spent, for the moment. "Sucks."

A few moments of quiet pass, during which the song inside the house changes to the muffled shuffle beat of a Michael Jackson song. His temper has subsided to brooding, now, and Theo seems to be gauging the waters as he speaks again.

"So, tell me something," he says, and Will quirks an eyebrow. "What do you think about time travel? Really. Personally, I don't see any future in it."

One corner of Will's mouth curls up. "Really? That was your best one?"

Theo takes the challenge immediately, stubbing out his cigarette and pacing a couple feet closer. "Well, you know, I used to be addicted to time travel. But that's all in the past now."

Will, reclined against the porch railing, bounces the heel of one sneaker on the toe of the other. "The barman says, 'We don't serve time travelers here.' A time traveler walks into the bar."

"The past, present, and future walked into a bar. It was tense."

Will groans, sinking down as if punched in the gut. Theo bows.

“Thank you, thank you.”

He settles against the railing next to Will. Just an *inch* closer than social expectation would dictate. Before Will can fully process this, Theo reaches out.

“You’re losing your Walkman.”

Casually, he settles the little device more firmly onto Will’s belt, at his hip. Earlier, Will had headphones around his neck to go with it, but they kept getting caught on things and he ended up giving them to Holly for safekeeping before heading to the party.

The Walkman was in no danger of falling. Will knows this. He adjusted it just seconds before exiting the house. Theo doesn’t give a shit about the Walkman; it’s a test. He’s seeing if Will is going to move away.

A conflicting hodgepodge of thoughts flash through Will’s mind all at once.

One: well, that answers whether or not this guy was flirting in theater.

Two: he’s too wound up for this. He can’t handle this. How do normal people flirt without giving themselves stress-migraines every other day?

Three: he has a choice to make.

Should he move away? One half-step and that’ll be the end of it, he’s sure. People like them - if he’s right about this - can’t afford to take risks on straight guys who cringe away from anything even mildly suggestive of homosexuality. Will could shift his weight away, break eye contact, and that would be it.

He could. But, should?

The moment is about to pass. He needs to make a decision.

A flare of defiance. Why *shouldn’t* he? Mike is inside with Emmett, and Will doesn’t particularly feel like trailing around after them all

night. And besides, he's allowed to spend time with whoever he wants. He's allowed to flirt with whoever he wants.

It's a novel thought. Enticing. Seductive in its simplicity.

He's allowed to flirt if he wants. People flirt. People flirt with people they like. Will is a people. Theo is a people. And, goddamnit, he's tired of living like this.

He can do this. He's done it once before, he can do it again.

He can do this.

He's had enough of cowering in the closet all alone. He could at least have some company every once in a while.

Theo's arm twitches, like he's *just* about to pull back nonchalantly and continue the conversation as if nothing ever happened. But then, instead of pulling away, Will leans in. Just an inch. Something that could be accidental, something easily brushed off if it turns out he misinterpreted this whole thing. But if Theo's slow smirk is anything to go by, Will's intuition is right on the money.

Mike would rather die than admit it out loud, but he's enjoying the crap out of this makeup.

He had his share of reservations when Emmett first suggested it - in fact, Emmett had to practically drag him into the bathroom, pushing and pleading, plying him with kisses - but now that he's here... He can't lie. This is fucking *fun*.

The first few minutes at the party were rough. He was uptight and suspicious, hackles raised like a cat, unsure and uncomfortable. But as the night goes on and he realizes he's not getting any dirty looks or bursting into flame or something, he's starting to really get into it.

The attention doesn't hurt. He's been getting a lot of it - from both genders, he notices. Everyone has something to say about it. Girls who have never spared him a second glance before are slinking up to him in their Bride of Frankenstein or Jem or Elvira costumes, smiling prettily, leaning their elbows on the counter so he can see their

breasts swelling against their low-cut necklines. Every so often, a guy will give him an appreciative glance or a thumbs up on the way by -

“Hey, cool costume, man.”

“Not bad, Wheeler.”

“I bet chicks dig the facepaint, yeah?”

And, of course, there's Emmett, who - thank god - had gotten sidetracked at the snack table chatting with another band geek, and barely noticed how long Mike had been gone. Emmett who keeps a hand on Mike's shoulder under the guise of keeping track of him. Emmett with his shy smile that's not quite so shy anymore, emboldened by the energy of the party and his painted mask.

Maybe Mike is a little braver than usual, too, because he realizes he's been carrying himself differently. His shoulders a bit prouder, perhaps, his head up - and behind his own mask of contoured, ghoulish pigments, he even starts to take little risks. Batting his eyelashes at Emmett playfully, giving coy smiles - the way he's seen his sister do, one corner of his mouth curling up in a knowing little smirk.

Mike usually hates the way he looks. He has a strange, somewhat ugly face - always has. Sharp and angular in all the wrong ways. He wasn't likened to an amphibian in middle school for nothing. He usually makes a face at himself in mirrors, turns away or half-covers his face or scowls for pictures - but now?

Now, for once in his life, he feels attractive. Really, truly. He can't stop smiling. He looks good. He really does. Even Will said so.

Will.

A low-level buzz of worry laps at his insides. He hasn't seen Will since after they danced.

But then, he did say he needed some air, and it's only been a few minutes. And Will hates it when people worry over him too much. Especially this time of year.

Mike tries to put it out of his head, laughing as Emmett throws Skittles at him, trying to get one to land in his mouth. One finally hits home and two drunken onlookers punch the air, *wooting*.

“You know, it’s a little hard to take you seriously in that.” Theo nods to Will’s costume. “Don’t get me wrong, you make a good argument. I’m just not exactly intimidated by Marty McFly, here.”

“That so?”

In the past fifteen minutes or so, Will has been mainly successful in his quest to distract himself from his woes. Theo is definitely flirting. No question about it. And Will is definitely flirting back. And it’s terrifying. And exhilarating. Is this what normal people feel like all the time? How do they handle this amount of heady freedom on a daily basis?

“Mm.” Theo nods again, stroking his chin, examining Will’s outfit with feigned seriousness. “Nope. Not intimidating. Cute as a *button* -” With a playful, lighter-than-air gesture, he taps Will on the nose - “But not intimidating.”

Will is reminded, suddenly and unpleasantly, of Emmett poking Mike on the nose. *You’re a magical fucking creature*. He shakes away the thought. Fuck Emmett. And fuck Mike, for that matter. He doesn’t want to think about them.

“I can be...” His shoulders wiggle as he crosses his arms, staring up at Theo defiantly. “Intimidating.”

He doesn’t feel intimidating. He feels unpracticed and jittery, especially when Theo takes the bait, shifting his stance to lean closer.

“That so?” Theo murmurs, using Will’s own words against him. His eyes flick down, and Will’s heart jumps as he realizes that the other boy is looking at his lips.

For a second, he oscillates. Teeter-tottering between hesitation and eagerness. Part of him wants to, really wants to, but -

Didn’t you always used to imagine your first kiss with Mike?

This isn't even your first kiss, he thinks back at himself, shoving down the little whisper in the back of his mind. And anyway, fuck Mike. He clearly didn't want me, and I'm clearly not his type, or he would have asked me instead. I don't need him.

He's tired of sitting around moping. If Mike can kiss someone else, so can Will. Just watch.

It's this surge of angry, *so-there* triumph that gives Will the courage to do it.

One rush of insane courage, one moment of madness. One shift of weight, one hand slipped up into the short waves at the back of Theo's head, and they're kissing.

The fake mustache bristles against Will's nose and upper lip. He's probably knocking it horribly askew.

That's the first thing he registers. The first sensation, and the last rational thought.

If there was ever any speck of lingering doubt as to his sexuality, Will isn't doubting anymore.

Is this why people kiss? Because the feeling of another solid, warm torso pressing against yours is so fundamentally satisfying? Because a blood-hot, saliva-slick mouth working against your own isn't off-putting at all, but addicting? Is this raw human connection what he's been denied this whole time?

He can't quite figure out how to breathe or what to do with his hands, and for a moment he breaks away to gasp in a lungful of air, lips still barely touching Theo's. He's the same height as Mike, Will realizes, and it makes this all so horribly easy. Then he's diving again, unwilling to give this up just yet, this new indulgence, this bewitching, adrenaline-sparkling thrill, and Theo takes it in stride. Pushing back, taking control again by turning to press Will into the side of the house, but Will doesn't mind. Something about this feels like revenge, sweet and metallic as blood in his mouth, and he wants to swallow every drop.

Where's Will?

He's still MIA. He didn't leave, did he? He wouldn't walk home by himself, not tonight. Would he?

Mike is beginning to feel a little off-kilter, and as for Emmett... Well, Emmett just chugged a cup of something and then promptly threw up chunks of candy in the kitchen sink.

It's time to go home.

He manages to wrestle Emmett into the back seat of his car, the whole time scanning the front yard for a familiar orange vest and head of auburn-brown hair. Nada. People are dotted here and there out front, one sweaty Robocop sans helmet upchucking into a bush, couples stumbling and pawing at each other, but no Will. Mike already swept the house, and he's not out front - where else would he be?

"I'm gonna go find Will," Mike tells his giggly boyfriend.

"Okie dokie, Cap'n," Emmett agrees, relaxed and amiable now that he's done throwing up.

"You stay here. I'll be back."

"Go get 'im, tiger."

Mike pauses, taken aback at the phrasing, then shakes his head and shuts the car door. He's just drunk, that's all.

One more sweep of the main floor. Calling Will's name, jumping to see over the crowd of heads. The music is more aggravating than anything, now. If he can't hear himself yell, how is Will supposed to hear him?

The upper level is a warren of rich-people bedrooms - most occupied. Downstairs is an entertainment center where shy or tired partygoers are watching the old Dracula. No Will. It occurs to Mike, just as his heart rate is really starting to pick up, that he still hasn't checked out back.

He's just reaching for the knob when the back door falls open, and a familiar figure slams right into his chest.

"Will, shit. There you are."

Will stumbles back, gawking, deer-in-the-headlights. He recovers a heartbeat later. "Hey - Mike - I -"

Someone in a white tank top pushes past him through the doorway, mumbling, "Scuse me, gentlemen."

"Emmett's down for the count," Mike says, relief palpable in his veins. He hooks an elbow into Will's so they don't get jostled apart by the crowd and starts to head towards the front door. "We gotta get him home."

"Sure." Will seems foggy, distracted.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." His cheeks are pink with cold. When he looks up, his expression is something Mike can't read. He smiles. "Great."

Will has a problem.

It's past midnight, and Will is at home. In bed. Alone.

He rode the wave of giddy inertia all the way from the porch to Mike's car to his own house, where Mike dropped him off before driving Emmett home to "get him into bed." Those were Mike's exact words. *I'm gonna go get him into bed.* And Will had been just punch-drunk enough, still flying high on his act of terrifying, stupid courage, that he almost responded, *yeah, I bet you are.* But he didn't.

He closed the front door behind him, and he tiptoed past his mother - asleep on the couch next to an empty candy bowl, waiting for him - and he went to his room. He stripped off his costume, one piece at a time. Walkman, sunglasses, sneakers, vest, jacket, suspenders, overshirt, jeans, undershirt. He was still grinning to himself as he brushed his teeth and got into bed. But lying there, alone again - that's where it all collapsed. House of cards. Whoosh, gone.

Because it didn't work.

It didn't work, and it's not fair.

Kissing someone else - an undeniably hot and charming guy, at that - was supposed to help. It was supposed to get rid of this hopeless pining for his best friend, not make it worse. But now that he's had a taste... now that he knows exactly what he's missing... fuck. He's aching all over again, worse than ever.

Fuck Mike. Seriously. Fuck. Him.

If Mike can go around kissing someone else, so can I. He clearly didn't want me and I'm clearly not his type, or he would have asked me instead. I don't need him. Except, Will does need him. Except, he *did* kiss someone else, and now he's lying in his bed, thinking about his best friend and feeling lonelier than ever.

Except, all he can think about is bolting up out of bed, tearing across town, storming right into Mike's room, crawling over his half-asleep form and kissing him awake, kissing his mouth, down his jaw, down his throat. Kissing him the way Will knows how to, now. Kissing him until neither of them have to think anymore.

The kicker? Mike probably isn't even *in* his own room right now.

Notes for the Chapter:

This story has kind of taken on a life of its own, haha. But hey, who am I to question my muses?

Thank you to the-angry-pixie for letting me borrow her OC Theo - if you guys haven't read *There's A Starman Waiting In the Sky*, go read it!! It's kind of the mirror image to *Roll For Strength*, and getting to work with her for this little mini-crossover of sorts was so much fun. Love ya Pix!

As always, I'd **love** to hear your guys' thoughts!

4. The Best Friend

There's been a storm bank pulling in for the past two hours.

It hasn't rained yet, not here at least, but the western sky is dark as late evening while the east is as bright and sunny as ever. Great gusts of wind push at the trees and houses of Hawkins, hurling flyers and newspaper sheets down the streets and flapping the skirts and jackets of everyone outside. It strips leaves from their branches and rattles loose shingles. A few stray specks of moisture appear on the windowpanes, and white-blue light pops in the distance with increasing regularity. In Emmett's attic bedroom, the far away reverberation of thunder begins to join the swells of gale-force wind that howl against his aunt's narrow, rickety house. Emmett's small, persnickety cat, Nausicaä, naps on the foot of the bed in a perfect circle.

Mike loves it. It's the perfect November weather, smelling like rain and autumn, sending whirls of orange and yellow leaves leaping high into the air. Emmett... not so much. He's been pissy all day. Mike can't figure it out. Shouldn't Emmett be happy with this weather? Not only is it atmospheric as hell, but shouldn't it remind him of home? Or maybe that's the problem. Maybe Washington is a bad memory and the incoming storm brings it back.

Whenever Mike asks, Emmett denies anything being wrong. It's like having a girlfriend again. Damn infuriating.

"I thought you liked rain."

They're sitting on the couch by the triangular attic window, playing *Super Mario Bros*.

Couch may be an exaggeration. It was up in the attic far before Emmett and his mom moved into this aunt's house. Holes in the cushions let the foamy padding poke through, and the whole thing smells distinctly of *dusty garage*. Apparently no one is quite sure how it was ever maneuvered up the attic stairs, but it's too heavy and cumbersome to move back, so here it stays. It's convenient, though. It's positioned in front of the tiny little TV that they use to play video

games and watch rental movies.

It's cold up here on the best of days - the heat just leeches right out of the thin walls - but today, with the cutting wind, it's freezing. Mike would get up and grab the duvet off Emmett's bed and wrap them both up in it, except that the cat is asleep on top of the duvet, his turn is coming up, and with Emmett's mood today he might just shrug it right off again.

Luigi makes a badly timed leap into a bottomless pit and the cheerful death jingle indicates Mike's turn.

"I do," Emmett says, but then doesn't elaborate as Mike starts the level.

Mike decides to dig. "But...?"

"But?"

Mario head-smashes a brick and picks up a star, and Mike begins his Goomba-murdering rampage with glee.

"Well you don't seem too pleased with it today."

Another beat of silence, filled only with the star power running out and the normal music starting up again. The trampoline-boing sound of Mario jumping fills the pause until Mike realizes that his boyfriend isn't going to answer. So he tries again.

"Reminds you of home too much? No no *no* - agh, that was close."

"I guess."

Mike shuts up temporarily to focus, sailing through the end of the level without dying. The victory music plays, Mario trots into the castle, and a moment later the cave theme starts up. Emmett can play this on guitar. It makes Mike smile to remember.

A minute into the underground level, he takes another, bigger risk. Because clearly Emmett isn't going to bring it up, after this long of avoiding the subject, and they're gonna have to talk about it sometime.

“Does it... remind you of your ex?”

He’s still looking at the screen, navigating the caves, so he doesn’t see his boyfriend’s reaction.

Mike knows a little about Emmett’s ex. Not much. Mostly just that they dated back in Washington, they were in a band together - both on guitar - and that Danny is the reason Emmett knows most of what he knows about sex. And Mike knows - well, he *thinks* that Emmett still misses him sometimes.

He wonders if they were best friends. If they grew up together in Washington. If they used to have sleepovers as little kids, if they had all the same haunts in their hometown. For a moment, he imagines it. Sleepovers slowly turning into something more. Lying on the floor of someone’s living room, late at night, whispering to avoid waking anyone else up. He tries to imagine how it might have happened. Was it a normal sleepover, just like every sleepover before it, until all at once they ended up too close and before they knew it they were staring at each other, both ready to bail at the twitch of an eyelash, terrified that the other would cringe away? How old were they? How long were they together before something happened to make them split up? Was their first kiss at twelve years old, years before anything happened beyond clothing, or was it not too long ago? Did they snap all at once, friends one day and lovers the next? Did they get home from school one day and just...

Something about the train of thought intrigues him. He doesn’t know why. He pushes it to the back of his brain to ruminate on later as Emmett takes a shallow half breath. Mike’s heart starts to beat just a little harder.

Here it comes, finally. This is going to be one of those conversations. The conversations you have with people you really care about, where you open your heart to each other like you’re peeling oranges. And by the end of it maybe you feel a little raw, but deeply fulfilled, connected. Because you just saw a tiny little bit of each other’s real inner life, their soul. All the everyday bullshit falls away and for a brief, breathtaking moment you can just be two people being vulnerable and honest to each other.

Mike loves those conversations. There aren't many people he can have them with - not many people he's *comfortable* having them with. Will is at the top of the list, of course, and El and Nancy are runners up, and once in a blue moon it'll happen with Dustin or Lucas. It's only happened with Max once or twice. And on a very rare occasion, Mike will have a conversation like that with his mom or dad - about the world, or morality, or the possibility of life on other planets, or life advice. You have to be careful with parents, though. Some things just can't be said around the people that can legally control your life.

A kicked turtle shell bounces unexpectedly off a brick wall and shrinks Mario down to half his height. Usually Mike would curse, but he's too focused on what Emmett is about to say. Mike is readying himself for anything, gearing himself up to listen or comfort or be righteously furious on his boyfriend's behalf - *he did what ? Fuck him! No wonder you broke up.*

He sneaks a peek to his left. It's been maybe three months since they met, and the dark roots are growing in under Emmett's white-blond hair. Mike thinks it looks cool. Emmett keeps threatening to bleach it again, or dye it some weird color. He hasn't, though, and Mike suspects it's because he gets enough dirty looks from the denizens of Hawkins High already, without having blue or pink hair.

"Get the brick," Emmett says, and it takes Mike a second to realize he's talking about a question mark brick that he almost left behind. He goes back for it just before it scrolls into oblivion and knocks it with Mario's head, earning himself a coin.

The moments crawl by and Mike holds out hope. Emmett's just thinking, taking his time to respond. But then Mario perishes in pursuit of a Fire Flower and Emmett takes the wheel as Luigi, and Mike's heart begins to sink. And then Emmett beats the underground level and continues on to World 1-3, pulls it off without a hitch and gets to the lava level before it's Mike's turn again, and Mike has to fight hard to stop from pouting.

This happens *all the time*. And he doesn't know what he's doing wrong.

Every time he tries to bring up something deeper than surface level,

something that would help bring them closer together... he gets ignored or brushed off. He feels like a little kid being shooed from the Grownup Table, or like he's trying to scuba dive in a kiddie pool. At the beginning of their relationship it was like an unspoken rule - they wanted to just keep it light. And Mike was perfectly fine with that. But as time goes on, it grates on him. How are they supposed to grow stronger as a couple if they can't talk about the deep stuff?

Last time, Mike tried opening up a little about his parents. They've commiserated before about homophobic family members, of course, so Emmett has heard all about Mike's conservative parents. But this was the first time that Mike tried talking to Emmett about growing up as the middle child, always just a little louder and more melodramatic than necessary because he felt like it was the only way to get any attention. How he developed a habit of repeating things twice because so often as a kid he felt like no one was listening the first time, between Nancy being perfect and baby Holly needing the attention that all infants need. Mike had hoped, in opening up with this, that his boyfriend would respond in kind and maybe share some of his own baggage. But Emmett just inserted a few sympathetic mutters here and there like, "Yeah, that's rough," and Mike left feeling a little silly for having spilled his guts for nothing.

He almost feels like they're running out of things to talk about. Which is stupid, and inaccurate. There's an infinite amount of conversations to be had in the universe. But there's really only so much music you can listen to together before getting bored, and you can only wander town and shoot the shit so much before it gets old, and there's a limited number of shared interests you can re-tread before conversations start lagging.

Mike tries to rally.

Relationships take work. Isn't that what everyone always says? They've just hit a rough patch. Everything Mike has ever read or seen in a movie tells him that the key to relationships is working through issues and sticking it out. His parents never work through issues, and they gave up on each other years ago. He's not going to be like that. He'll just stick it out and it'll turn out fine. It's his own fault for... for... well he's sure it's *something* he did or didn't do. He just has to try harder to figure out what it is he's doing wrong. Maybe he's

approaching it badly. He'll charge himself with the responsibility of putting the stars back in Emmett's eyes and in a month this will all have blown over.

And anyway, Emmett *understands* about being queer - and how incredibly rare is that? Finding someone in a small conservative town like this that *understands* ? And Emmett is generally easygoing and always up to take a walk to soothe Mike's restlessness, or window shop, or go to a movie, or play video games, or whatever. Emmett is attractive and kind and it feels so incredibly *good* when they're writhing together under his sheets. It feels right. This isn't like what happened with El. Is it? No, of course it isn't. Of course it isn't. He and Emmett aren't together because they assumed that's what they *should* do. It's quite the opposite. According to the majority of society they were never supposed to get together. That's half of what makes it so addictive: the adrenaline. It's like a roller coaster. You're scared the whole time, terrified that someone is going to catch you and ruin your life, but every time you survive anyway.

But...

And there's that *but*.

Now that they've been dating for a few months, the shiny-new luster is beginning to wear off, and Mike finds himself thinking more and more of Will.

And he hates himself for it.

It's useless, it's childish, he should be over that, and anyway, it's only going to hurt everyone involved - himself, Emmett, Will. Is he so much like his own mother? He hits one rough patch in his relationship and suddenly he's pining after old flames?

Not that Will is -

Will isn't an old flame. They never -

Will would never.

Old *crushes*. That's what he meant. And Mike shouldn't be thinking about that anyway.

Mike dies in the underwater level and Emmett is taking a stab at it, tongue poking between his lips as he concentrates, when footsteps begin to ascend the creaky attic steps. A moment later someone knocks on the door, and Emmett pauses the game.

“Come in.”

The bedroom door opens and Emmett’s mom pokes her head in.

Emmett's mother is a thin woman, with honey-brown hair prone to frizzing and the scent of an art classroom hanging around her. Her nose is narrow, like Emmett’s, but apparently he inherited his blue-gray eyes from his father. Hers are green.

She teaches elementary school. Most of the reason they moved was, apparently, because Emmett’s aunt told her that there was a position open in Hawkins Elementary, and his mom applied for the job over the phone and got it. So here they are. She usually wears floral-patterned cotton dresses, or brightly colored blouses with slacks. Typical elementary teacher clothes. Today she’s in casual jeans and a sweatshirt, and she starts a little when she notices Mike curled up on the couch next to Emmett. He almost puts some space between himself and his boyfriend, before remembering: this is one of the few adults he can trust. She doesn’t care about them. She’s even seen them kiss before.

“Oh, hey Mike,” she says, smiling and pawing at her hair as if she’s embarrassed that it’s not fixed in its usual fluffy curls. “I thought maybe I heard your voice.”

“Hey, Mrs. S- Rosemary.” She has insisted, repeatedly, that he should call her by her first name.

Mike thinks he’s picked up more about Emmett’s past from observing his mother than Emmett has ever told him. She moves very carefully, jumps at loud noises, and is always *very* careful with how she phrases things so that she couldn’t possibly offend anyone in the room.

Mike has picked up a habit of people watching, in the past few years. Partly because it used to help him spot interesting people to make into characters for campaigns - and now because he’s been doing

more writing, aside from campaigns, and it helps him there too. He likes to think he can be pretty observant when he wants to be. And something about Emmett's mother reminds Mike of Joyce, back when they were little kids and Lonnie still lived in the Byers house. Except, Rosemary has none of the steel and fire that Joyce does - at least, none that's apparent to Mike. All at once, he wonders if her insistence to call her by her first name instead of her last isn't due to an attempt at being chummy, but rather because she doesn't want to be associated with that last name anymore.

"Otter, your aunt and I are gonna go on some errands before it storms tonight. You need anything?"

Emmett flushes a little at the pet name, and Mike almost elbows him in the ribs with a sly grin before remembering that Emmett isn't in the mood for teasing today.

"No. Thanks. Wait, yes, soap."

"Bar soap or hand soap?"

"Bar."

"Okay. Back later."

"Don't get blown away," Emmett calls after her, and she tosses, "No promises" over her shoulder as she descends the stairs again.

Emmett gets up with a sigh of irritation to close the door after her.

"Parents," Mike says, grasping onto something they can bond over. "Always coming in and then leaving the door open."

"Right?"

Emmett flops back onto the couch, and a second later he slides a hand around Mike's ribs, nosing at his cheek.

"You're not subtle," Mike says as they listen to the front door open and close two floors away.

"*You're* not subtle," Emmett rebuts, pressing into a kiss and

skimming his hand down to rest questioningly just above Mike's belt.

There, Mike thinks, relieved, as he presses back. *See? It was nothing. We're fine.*

Emmett fumbles with the controller before accidentally dropping it on the floor, and Mike smiles against his mouth. *I bet I know something that would cheer you up*, he thinks, and moves a questioning hand of his own.

"Hey, do you have plans after sch-?"

"Yeah, actually!" Will chirps, barely giving Emmett a chance to finish his sentence.

Mike looks at Will, confused. *We did?* Shit, he can't remember. He's had such a hell-week, he's not surprised he blanked it. He nods along and Emmett shrugs.

"Oh, okay. Catch you later, then?"

"Later," Mike says, lifting a hand in a farewell, and Emmett swings his backpack onto his shoulder and lopes off down the school hallway. He always moves so fast, with those long legs of his. Mike only glances at his ass once before turning back to Will. His stomach sinks a little at the look on Will's face. He just *knows* that Will can tell Mike forgot about their plans.

Mike grimaces. "I'm really sorry, I totally forgot we were gonna hang out today. I would have taken my bike this morning, then we could have biked home together."

Will's expression shifts, and not for the better. He almost looks guilty. Then it smooths out and he tosses his head with a smile and a one-shouldered shrug. "Nah, don't worry about it. I've been in a brain fog this week too. I barely remembered which day it was today. I kept thinking it was Friday."

"God, if only."

Around them, lockers slam and highschoolers chatter and yell,

swarming for the exits. They follow the flow, letting it carry them towards the front doors. The school is festooned with paper autumn leaves and big hand-painted posters that say things like *Happy Thanksgiving!* and *What did the turkey dinner say to the chef? Fowl play!* The sky has been a steely gray all day - something Mike has liked since he was a kid, since it makes the classrooms feel somehow cozier and more homey than usual.

They make it through the bottleneck and out the front doors, and then they're free, stepping into a cool, fine mist. It's not quite rain, but it's trying. Will pulls up the hood of his jacket.

Mike breathes in that familiar, relieved feeling of *end of the school day*. He did it. He got through another day. No more school until tomorrow.

And, he reminds himself, if he only survives this week and next week, then they'll have a whole week of Thanksgiving break. One whole week free from school. It sounds like heaven.

He's fully prepared to walk alongside Will's bike, enduring Will's teasing - usually he rides circles around Mike, goading, if he's on a bike and Mike is on foot. But when they get to Will's bike and Will wipes down the seat with a sleeve, he gets on and beckons to Mike.

"Hop on."

"Huh?"

Will points to the back wheel pegs as if Mike is an idiot.

Mike has to laugh. "Like when we were kids?"

"Why not?"

"Uh -"

Because it's wet and rainy, because they haven't done that in years, because they're gonna fall in a mud puddle, because -

Because now Mike is suddenly imagining holding on tight to Will's shoulders as he pedals, feeling the shift in Will's body with every

pump of his knees and every turn, and now Mike is suddenly imagining holding on tight to Will's shoulders while he does a much different kind of pumping and -

Absolutely not. He can't do it. Out of the question.

"Yeah. Sure, fine. Whatever."

Fuck.

"We're gonna die, though," Mike adds impotently, because he has to at least show *some* kind of resistance to this.

Then he's tightening the straps of his backpack, blushing hard, pulling his own hood up to hide it, and bracing himself on Will's shoulder to swing a leg up and over.

They didn't have plans.

And Mike knows it. And Will knows it. But no way is he going to let Emmett drag Mike away for a whole afternoon *again*, when Will has barely gotten to see Mike outside of school all week. Emmett will just have to go without his precious boyfriend for a day, and vice versa. Boo hoo. No blowjobs until tomorrow.

He feels like a jerk as soon as he thinks it.

He tries to push the thought aside. He should be savoring this bike ride while he can.

Mike's hands squeeze down on his shoulders, crumpling the fabric of his jacket to keep a firm grip, and he can feel the weight and heat of Mike just behind him, leaning against his back as Mike shifts and adjusts his stance and whoops when they hit a bump. The physical contact is like a balm.

Will could blame the season. Fall always tends to make him either highly avoidant of any touch, or highly clingy. No in between. He could just blame the cold, damp weather and be done with it - it's just the anniversary effect that's making him more physically affectionate with Mike of late. This year is a cuddly year, apparently.

But he knows it's more than that. He's been more affectionate with Mike in the past couple weeks than he has in the past year. Bumping against Mike in hallways, leaning against him in more private moments. They even linked pinkies under the table for a couple minutes the other day, during AV club. They haven't done that since they were thirteen. Thank god Mike knows to expect the anniversary effect, because it gives Will a convenient explanation. In fact, he doesn't even need to explain anything. He can just appear at Mike's side, silent as a shadow, and lean against him. And Mike doesn't so much as bat an eye.

If anything, the affection may actually be making Will's quandary *worse*. Now that he knows what he's missing... Now that he's made out with a guy (once - but still), he will not be satisfied until he has that again. And he wants it with Mike.

Every time he leans his shoulder against Mike's when they sit next to each other, his chest aches with the desire to just pull Mike flush against him, back-to-front so they can share body heat. Every time Mike bows his head to whisper something in Will's ear, Will has to stop himself from turning just *slightly* and nuzzling their faces together. And every time Will goes to bed, he has to force himself *not* to lie there and imagine fitting his mouth to Mike's and working their lips together, pulling a hand through Mike's dark, wavy hair, slotting their legs together until they're pressed together head-to-toe. He often fails, and spends far longer than he'd like to admit indulging in fantasy. And then he's left with a less than optimal amount of sleep and an empty bed.

Maybe if Mike would just spend a little bit of time with Will, Will wouldn't be pining after him like a stupid lovesick puppy. He feels like he barely sees his best friend anymore. During the weekend Mike has plans with Emmett. After school Mike has plans with Emmett. At lunch - guess what?

And Will misses him. He misses riding home side-by-side after school and he misses the long conversations that never ran dry and he misses Mike's laugh and his steady presence by Will's side and he misses his best friend.

So when they make it back to the Byers house and head inside to

make hot chocolate, shivering and breathless, Will's expression turns sour the moment he hears the word *Emmett* out of Mike's mouth.

"He wanted to see it because of some actress that's in it, I think," Mike is saying, and Will makes a face while his back is turned.

Actress. Sure. Will reaches down a box of Swiss Miss packets and digs in the cupboard for marshmallows. Mike takes the box that Will shoves at him and keeps talking.

"So we were thinking we'd try to see it his weekend, and then we were saying how they always charge way too much for the candy, so Emmett was like, 'we should just sneak some in,' but we don't have purses or anything because we're not girls and they're not gonna let us bring backpacks in, so we're thinking we're gonna have to tape candy to the insides of our jackets or something like we're -"

"Okay, okay, *okay* !"

It takes him by surprise as much as it does Mike. He didn't know he was going to explode until he did. Mike stands there holding two hot chocolate packets, head moving in a little *the fuck is up with you?* swivel. Will climbs down from the counter holding two mugs, moving with as much dignity as can be mustered while climbing down off a counter. Which is to say, not much.

"Look I get it," he snaps. He pulls the packets from Mike's hands and busies himself by emptying them into the mugs. If his hands are moving he doesn't have to look at Mike's face. "He's great. I get it. Now can we talk about *anything* else? He's not even here."

Mike is silent for two heartbeats before ramping up to meet Will's energy. "What's your deal?" he snaps back. Will knows that tone. Mike is getting defensive, or rather pre-defensive, ready to jump onto a soap box at a moment's notice if he feels that some injustice is being dealt. "Why don't you like him?"

"I -" Will swallows his words. He doesn't want to do this, not now, not really. He wanted an afternoon with Mike, not a fight. "Like him fine."

Skeptical, guarded silence. It's probably what Will deserves. Mike isn't going to accept that alone; he knows Will too well for that. He knows there's something else going on. So Will takes a deep breath, picks up the kettle with an oven mitt and pours hot water over the powder mix in both mugs. And he lets out just a tiny corner of the truth.

"You just... seem to be having a lot of fun with your new best friend, is all. You sure you need the Party anymore?"

Lumping in the Party sounds forced and obvious, even to his own ears. Even so, he swears he hears Mike's breath hitch.

"He's not my best friend."

It's said with such conviction that Will looks at Mike before he finishes putting the kettle down. This results in him almost setting it on the very edge of the stove, where it would have crashed to the floor and splattered boiling hot water all over both of them if Mike didn't grab Will's arm with a hiss of "Careful -"

It's only a brief moment. Mike guides Will's hand a little farther back, where the kettle won't fall, and then he lets go and it's over. Will swears he feels a glowing imprint of Mike's palm on his arm even after he pulls the oven mitt off.

"Really?"

Mike, unexpectedly, actually scrunches up his nose and *laughs*, as if the idea is ridiculous. A real laugh, teeth showing, shoulders moving with his breath. "What? No. " He knocks his shoulder into Will's. "That's you, dumbass."

He picks up his mug and stirs lumps of cocoa mix into the hot water, and Will does the same. But he can't help looking back to Mike and pushing.

"Really? You just... you're *always* hanging out with him and talking up how great he is and... I dunno, seems like you don't have much need for us nerds anymore."

He's trying to turn it into a joke, fake-grinning, but Mike's face is

serious.

Mike's mug *clinks* as it makes contact with the counter, and his hand moves for Will's. Then it twitches back, waffles, and at last alters course and settles on Will's shoulder instead. Mike's head is bowed, and when it lifts, Will is startled by the amount of genuine emotion in it.

"I'm sorry."

This is not what he was expecting.

"I'm an idiot."

All Will can think to say is, "You're not a—"

"I am. I did this with El and —" Will sees the minuscule twitch of panic in Mike's eyes as he realizes he just compared El to Emmett. He pretends not to notice as Mike scrambles to clumsily cover it up. "—now I'm doing the same thing with a new — friend. God, I'm stupid. I should have known better after last time, I guess I just — I dunno, got kind of... caught up in it."

Will tries not to think about what that might mean.

But then Mike is looking right into his eyes in that earnest way of his, saying, "I'm sorry, Will. I didn't realize I was gone so much. But he's not my best friend. I've barely known him for three months. *You're my best friend. Always will be. You know that, right?*"

Conflicting bittersweet emotions swell and pulse in Will's chest, clashing together like waves on a stormy ocean. On the one hand he's *so glad*. And on the other, he can't stop thinking, *but I don't just want to be your best friend. I want — I wanted to be your boyfriend. Which he is.*

"Sure," Will manages. "I know."

For one ridiculous moment Han and Leia flash before Will's eyes — *I love you. I know*. It's an old daydream he borrowed from one of his favorite movies as a kid. He used to imagine it around the same time that he often daydreamed about cuddling in the same sleeping bag.

Or going to summer camp together.

That one used to be a favorite. He'd lie in bed, or sit in class, and just stare into space imagining a highly unrealistic dream world where he and Mike would pack their backpacks and leave Hawkins and everything in it far behind. They'd go to some far-away state and bunk up in a cabin together - somehow, they were always the only two people in the cabin, despite the fact that summer camp cabins are invariably built to house a small army. They'd ride horses and do archery together, just like they used to pretend as kids, and they'd eat in the mess hall and sit around the bonfire in the evenings. Will's daydream summer camp had a small arcade room in the main lodge. It had no mosquitoes or flies. It had shockingly negligent camp counselors, always allowing him and Mike to sneak off on their own.

Some things never change. Now, like then, Will's face is going a little hot at the idea of just giving in and pressing a quick, heartfelt peck to Mike's lips.

The worst part, the most unfair part, is that he was supposed to be over all of that. This was going to be his year. He was over Mike, he *had* moved on, because there was no hope and he refused to spend his whole life wasting away pining after someone who could never want or love him back. But Mike can, *does* like guys. And from what Will could tell on Halloween, Mike might even be attracted to Will. Love, though...

The silence has gone on too long, and Mike's grip loosens from Will's shoulder, about to move away.

"You are, too," he says, tripping over himself to say it before the moment ends and they have to go back to the real world, the everyday world where this kind of vulnerability doesn't happen.

Mike's eyes crinkle in a smile. "I know."

It's such an accurate - though coincidental - echo of Will's thoughts that he almost wonders if Mike knew what he was just thinking. But of course he didn't.

They drink their hot chocolate mostly in silence. It's comfortable.

Companionable. And when Will is swirling the dregs at the bottom of his cup, he senses that they're still in that protected bubble of exception, that pocket universe of openness that they enter together every once in a while. They haven't quite put their walls back up yet. So Will clears his throat.

"Hey, uh... I wanted to show you some drawings I've been working on."

He's been thinking about it since Halloween. He and Mike used to share their creations with each other. What happened? When did they stop? Almost two weeks have passed since Halloween and he still can't quite pinpoint it. Ninth grade maybe? Is that when they fell out of the habit of being creative partners, when they both started to join other activities and got busy with their own lives?

Another smile bursts over Mike's face, this one as surprised as it is pleased. "Yeah. Lead the way."

On the way to his room, Will ventures, "Have you written anything lately?"

They spend the afternoon reconnecting. It's such a relief that Will thinks he could cry. And he could just be projecting, but Mike almost seems to unwind some inner tension as well. They sit on the floor of Will's bedroom, papers spread out around them - sketches, notes, rough drafts - talking themselves down one rabbit hole and then another. At one point they laugh themselves hoarse over the idea of feral pilgrims.

Will wipes tears from his eyes as Mike leans bonelessly against him, trying to calm his diaphragm, and thinks, *I've missed this.*

Notes for the Chapter:

Surprise, bitch.

So this chapter was going to be longer and have more in it but then they started sharing a bike and making hot chocolate and I was just like "well okay, you do you."

As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts! Sometimes

I have readers who are like "oh other people already commented something I was going to say so I won't bother," no silly say it again anyway! I promise you, writers do not get tired of comments no matter what they are.

5. Crit Fail

Dustin slams the trunk of the van down, all smiles. His pom-pom hat is a little askew on his head. "I can't *believe* how perfect this night is, guys. If I see one piddling little cloud poke its ugly face over that horizon, I'll sue."

"Sue who?" Lucas half-yells from inside the garage, where he's hunting for camping lanterns and flashlights. "Mother Nature?"

"Yeah, and that bitch better pay up. She still owes me for my seventh birthday party."

El snorts, nearly inhaling her tea, and Max just shivers sullenly. She's been here for years, but at heart she's still a California girl. Always cold. Always piling on sweaters and jackets during the winter.

They've been waiting for a night this clear for weeks. Well, a *weekend* night. Typically, there were plenty of clear nights - all on school nights. And it's not like they couldn't have snuck out, but that's risky, and takes a lot of effort, and none of them wanted to end up grounded for Thanksgiving break. So they waited. *Et voila* - today is a Saturday, there's only one week of school left before break, and the sky is clear as crystal.

It's also very, very cold. Which, according to Dustin, is perfect. Heat distorts the air and makes it harder to pick up a clear image through a telescope.

The plan: take the Sinclairs' van out into the middle of nowhere where there aren't any lights, pull off the road, and set up Dustin's brand-spanking-new, red, pot-bellied Astroscan telescope to scan the sky. Dustin claims they'll be able to see Saturn's rings. And even if they can't, even if he can't get the telescope to work at all, they haven't gone stargazing since they were kids. It'll be fun. Will tells himself that as he blows into his gloves to warm his already-numb fingers. It'll be fun. It'll be fine.

The various parents mostly shook their heads and made tutting noises - *Isn't it too cold out for this kind of thing?* - but they all secured

permission, so nobody has to sneak out this time. They're gathered in the Sinclairs' driveway, chattering and loading blankets and star maps into the van, when Mike arrives. With Emmett.

Will tries not to grit his teeth. Mike has been better about that. Really, he has. Since their conversation over hot chocolate, earlier this week, he's been trying not to be so *completely* monopolized by Emmett. He actually shows up to lunch sometimes, and he asked Will if he wanted to hang out after school yesterday instead of disappearing as usual. He still can't say he's overjoyed to see the tall blonde in question.

They're on foot, obviously just having walked the short distance from Mike's house, and they're bundled up just as much as everyone else. Emmett has a slouchy knit cap pulled over his hair, just far enough back on his head that his bangs poke out. Will glances at his chest, wondering if he's wearing another one of Mike's sweaters under his trademark leather jacket, but it's zipped too high to tell. Mike doesn't look nearly as suave. He's wearing a hat he'd never be caught dead in at school: a goofy red and white knit cap with ear flaps and a long tassel hanging down from each. Will is pretty sure his grandma made it. She's the one that knits most of the Wheeler sweaters, and the pattern on the hat is similar. Still, the ends of Mike's hair stick out underneath, and his eyes are bright, and when he smiles at Will from across the driveway Will can't help but smile back.

"Ello, guvna!" Dustin hollers as they approach, side-by-side, their strides synced up.

"Top o' the mornin' to ya," Mike bounces back. "Or should I be sayin' top o' the evenin'?"

"Bottom of the night, maybe," Max tosses in with a yawn.

Emmett lifts a hand, a little awkward as usual. "Hey, guys."

There's a scattered chorus of, "Hey," and "Hey, Emmett."

"Hey. Hi." Mike reaches the group, stopping next to Will, and accepts the thermos Will holds out with a sigh. "Ah, thanks." He sips, then sniffs as the steam sets his nose running. He's always been like that.

Ever since he was five. He can't drink something hot, especially outside in the cold air, without starting to sniff. "Jesus. Freezing out here. Is that *coffee*?"

Will takes the thermos back and takes a sip for himself. "Sure is."

Mike's nose wrinkles, and Will holds in a laugh. Will has been drinking his coffee black for years. Mike invariably dumps more sugar and milk into the cup than actual coffee.

"It's eight thirty at night."

Will meets Mike's eyes and holds eye contact as he takes a long, deliberate sip, and Mike rolls his eyes with a laugh.

"Whatever, dude. It's your sleep schedule."

"Bold of you to assume I sleep."

Most of the others brought tea or hot chocolate, but Will gave up on his sleep cycle years ago. Maybe the extra jitters were a bad idea, considering everything, but... oh well. He wants his drug, and at least it's caffeine and not heroin.

"Emmett!" It's El, waving from the front door. "You got a hand?"

"Yeah," Emmett calls back, loping away to help. "What's up?"

"I just need someone to help carry blankets. They're bulkier than..."

Their voices have barely retreated into the house before Lucas mutters, "Should we tell him this isn't a runaway?"

Mike stiffens a degree. If he wasn't standing close enough to Will for their arms to brush, Will might not have noticed it. "What do you mean?"

"C'mon." Lucas smiles conspiratorially, like they're all sharing a joke in class when they're supposed to be working quietly. "The jacket? The pants? We're going out in the middle of nowhere, buddy, there's nobody out there to impress with your gay little tight pants. Maybe chill out a little."

He says *gay* the way people usually say *stupid*, so Will can't tell if he actually suspects or not. Either way, Mike is... not taking that comment well. Will can feel him tensing up and wilting at the same time, shoulders hunching uncomfortably under his jacket as he opens and closes his mouth. His face is red - redder than the cold-flush it just had a moment ago.

And something in Will, some small little thread, snaps. He may not exactly *like* Emmett - well, that's not true, he'd like him fine if it wasn't for the whole Mike situation - but... they are on the same team, after all.

"Hey, *lay off*."

All heads turn to him. Lucas blinks, startled by how sharp the words were, and Will can see Mike staring at him in his peripheral vision.

He can feel himself going hot under the skin, so he looks down at his thermos to try to appear nonchalant. As if he could play off casualty after *that* tone of voice. "What do you even care what pants he wears? They're pants. Maybe you're just jealous that he always looks cooler than you do."

The last statement is lighter, teasing. An attempt to lighten the mood and move on, after that abrupt change of tone.

There's a beat or two of quiet, and for a moment Will's fingers start shaking, afraid that Lucas is about to pursue the issue and come dangerously close to a topic Will isn't ready to discuss. *Why are you defending him? Why do you care? You have a personal investment in this or something? Is there something we need to know about you? What are you hiding, Will?*

But then Lucas lifts a hand to his chest. "You insult me. I'm cooler than all of you."

And just like that he wanders away. The moment has passed. Will lets out a breath.

The feeling of being watched draws his attention, and when he looks, his eyes meet Mike's for a split second. It's just a flicker, a flash of

time before Mike's gaze skips away, but in that second Will could have sworn he saw a smile.

The drive is long, at least compared to any drive within Hawkins, and the passengers of the van are rowdy. Lucas yells at them repeatedly to quiet down because he can't drive when they're all being loud. They mostly ignore him. Which might account for why he gets lost twice, and Dustin has to pull out the map from the glove box and read it by the yellowish overhead car light.

They sip at too-hot drinks from thermoses, trying not to splash the steaming liquid on themselves as they go over bumps, and they play the radio too loud. If a really good song comes on, most of them sing along, loudly and badly. Will tussles with El, wrestling her like a sibling for a blanket they both want, and slaps her arm when she bites his ear.

"Ow," she whines, and Will lunges for the blanket.

"Well, you *bit* me."

"Not hard!"

"Yes hard!"

"Baby."

"It hurt!"

"*I will turn this van around,*" Lucas yells from the front, making everyone laugh.

Then Dustin snatches the coveted soft blanket, starting a whole new war. Will and El team up in a flash, Will distracting Dustin by tickling him while El uses her powers to yank the blanket back. Triumphant, the surrogate siblings huddle together under the blanket, gloating while Dustin calls them cheaters.

Max is, miraculously, sleeping through it all.

And through it all, Will can feel himself very slowly sliding towards

the end of his rope. Because Emmett and Mike? Surprise surprise, they offered to take the wayback. And, surprise surprise, they're sharing a blanket of their own. Will doesn't think the rest of the Party has noticed, or at least they don't think much of it. But he noticed. He noticed how the blanket is draped *just* so, as if to conceal two interlocked hands. And he can feel his aggravation mounting through most of the car ride, irrationally, until he wants to twist around and yell, *Okay! I get it! You're two snuggly lovebirds! You can hold hands and make out and shit! Whoop-de-fuckin'-doo!*

By the time Lucas declares that they've driven far enough, and they pull over in an area with as few trees as they can find, Will is just about grinding his teeth. But he's an adult. Almost. Pretty much. He's mature. He can handle this. He can swallow it down and have a good time. He doesn't need to let his stupid jealousy ruin a fun night with his friends.

And he does pretty well, all things considered. They're all bundled up in coats and hats and gloves, wrapped in blankets, hopping and shivering and bitching as Dustin uses a flashlight to set up the telescope on a fold-out card table. Their teeth chatter and their breath steams, and they laugh and whoop and shush each other, because there might be a house somewhere across the barren winter fields. People might be trying to sleep. But they're shouting again before long, forgetting to be quiet, and Max takes off at a run down the dark and empty street to warm up her feet and El chases after her, and Will is just feeling pretty good for being okay with this. With the dark. With the cold. He almost didn't agree to this, but... It's been years, and he wanted to go have a good time with his friends. And he's not a baby, he can handle things. He doesn't need to hide away in a warm, safe house all his life, cowering from the dark like a little kid. He's *fine*. He's just a little on edge, is all.

And maybe that's what does it. Maybe he's just a little too high-strung, letting himself get a little too freaked out by the pressing darkness and the illusion of movement in the fields. Maybe he should have given it another moment's thought before turning and snapping, "Could you back up a little?"

Emmett had come to lean casually over Mike's shoulder as Mike peered into the telescope. The problem was, Will happened to be

standing next to Mike. The looming presence in his peripheral vision sent a prickle of instinctual panic down the back of his neck, and when he jerked up to discover it was just Emmett... He spoke without thinking. Snarled, really.

When Mike speaks it's soft. Maybe he knows why Will is so jumpy. Maybe he's trying to show forgiveness with his tone. Or maybe he's hurt, and the softness is a bluff. "He was just looking."

"He can look *outside* of my personal bubble."

And Emmett - shy, sweet, easygoing Emmett, the bastard - immediately starts to apologize. Will wants to bash his head against a wall. His own head, that is. And maybe Emmett's too.

"I'm sorry, man, I know you've got your -" He makes a large circle with his hands, indicating Will. "Personal space thing. I should've -"

"It's fine."

"No, I should've thought -"

"It's fine." Will pushes away from the table, needing space. Needing a flashlight, a lantern, *anything*. "I'm getting my thermos, be right back."

He finds the camping lantern in the back of the van. His hands shake as he clicks it on. They're still shaking when he locates his coffee and takes a long sip. It's lukewarm now, and stale in his mouth, but he keeps tilting it back until it's almost gone.

He stands by the open trunk, in that little pool of lantern light, and tries to breathe long, even breaths. He counts them, *in one two three, out one two three, in one two three*.

He feels like a jerk.

Because I am a jerk, he thinks. He can feel a self-hatred spiral coming on, fueled by caffeine and anxiety. He should use one of those techniques his old therapist taught him to head it off, but he's too frayed and sullen to make the effort. *I've been acting like a possessive little jealous asshole for weeks. Why can't I ever do things right? Why*

can't I ever just be a normal, decent person? Why am I still like this? Can't I just enjoy one night with my friends? Am I gonna spend my whole damn life jumping at shadows? Why can't I just be normal? Why -

"Hey."

El is walking towards him, her boots crunching over the hard crust of old snow on the ground. She knew. Somehow, she always knows.

"Hey."

He scoots over, giving her room to perch on the lip of the trunk with him. She doesn't say anything, but they both know she's waiting for him to talk.

Finally, he sighs. "I've been a real asshole lately."

"Because you're not used to Mike spending his time with someone else?"

Stated like that, in that blunt way of hers, it makes Will cringe a little. It sounds so childish.

"I guess. Yeah."

"Makes sense. He's your best friend."

That sting of irritation flares up in his chest again. "Yeah, so he said."

El gives him another few seconds to go on, and when he doesn't she says, "So you're mad at Emmett for it."

"Taking it out on him, more like," Will mutters, although that's not *exactly* true. Most of his sharp words have been contained within his own head... or, every once in a while, behind Emmett's back.

The thought comes quietly, but clear as a bell. He thinks back on the past month and a half, on the things he's thought, things he's said. Ways he's acted. And he thinks, *I don't want to be that kind of person.*

It's not fair. Not to Emmett, not to Mike. And maybe not to Will, either. It's not Emmett's fault that Will has been in puppy love with

his best friend since he was little, and in real love with him since... well, that's hard to pinpoint. It's not his fault that Will was so rattled by his discovery of Mike's sexuality, after Will was so determined to drop the childhood crush and move on. It's not Emmett's fault that Will tried so hard and failed so spectacularly to do so. And it's not Mike's fault that...

Will's nose stings and he quickly takes another sip of coffee, tilting down the last cold dredges, to hide the swelling from El.

It's not Mike's fault that he doesn't want Will. That he never wanted Will, or surely he would have said *something*. Surely *something* would have happened, in the twelve years they've known each other.

And nothing is going to get better with Will acting like a pouty child all the time.

So, that's that. He'll just have to put on his big boy pants, be happy for his best friend, and deal with it.

Will caps the empty thermos, nods to El that he's ready to go back, and walks over the dirty crust of snow to squint at Saturn with his friends.

Will has been straining his ears for the past half hour, waiting on the edge of his seat, so when the faint knock sounds from above he's the first one on his feet.

Mike is standing too, but Will is already moving towards the basement stairs. "I'll get it."

"It's probably Emmett," Mike says, as Will strides up the stairs two at a time.

"I know."

He bounds up into the kitchen, leaving Mike blinking confusedly, and weaves around Mrs. Wheeler and Holly to get to the door.

Emmett's smile freezes with surprise when he sees Will opening the door instead of Mike, but it unfreezes barely a second later. "Hey,

Will,” he says, amiable despite the bags under his eyes. “Uh -” He spreads his arms, as if in celebration. “Happy break! Hallelujah, right?”

“No kidding. If I never see a difference quotient again it’ll be too soon.” Will steps aside, letting him in.

They haven’t seen each other since their last day of school, half a week ago, and in that time Will has done plenty of thinking. This is his first real chance to put his plan in action, and he won’t screw it up.

Mrs. Wheeler pokes her head out of the kitchen to see who’s at the door. “Oh, hi Emmett,” she calls, then whips around to yell, “Holly, don’t eat that!”

“Hi, Mrs. Wheeler.”

“Hi Emmett!” Holly pipes from somewhere in the kitchen, her mouth full.

“Hi, Holly.”

Emmett shrugs his jacket off, hanging it on the coat rack by the Wheeler’s front door. Will can see him scanning the assortment of other coats, seeing who’s already here: Lucas’s army-green coat, Dustin’s puffy parka, El’s elegant (though secondhand) wool pea coat, Max’s denim jacket. The whole gang’s here. Will is still wearing his well-loved bomber jacket that he inherited from Jonathan; the basement is chilly during the cold months of the year.

Will leads the way towards the basement. “What’ve you been doing over break?” he tries, inwardly smacking himself at how forced it sounds.

“Oh.” Emmett’s eyebrows pop up, like he hadn’t expected the initiation of conversation. “Uh, nothing. My aunt has been wanting to repaint the kitchen for months, so I kinda got roped into that now that I have some days off.”

Well, that explains the blotches of orange paint on Mike’s arms and knees the other day.

“Oh, nice. What color?”

“Kind of an orangey yellow.”

“Cheerful,” Will says, grasping at straws to keep the conversation going. They pass the Wheelers in the kitchen and start down the stairs, and Emmett unexpectedly picks up the conversation for himself.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s kind of tacky, but... that’s my aunt.” He laughs. “Pain in the ass, though. I mean, that kitchen has been collecting shit for decades. So first we had to move everything that was in the kitchen to the living room, and then we had to *clean* everything because there was food gunk splattered all on the -” He scrubs his hands over his face, a gesture so reminiscent of Mike that Will wonders if Emmett picked it up from him. “It was gross. And now whenever we walk through the living room we have to step around a maze of cookbooks and electric mixers and everything.”

It’s more than Emmett has said to Will in weeks, and Will tries to feel triumphant. He’s been trying to be more open to him. Less closed-off and frosty, and less internally resentful. That last part is the kicker. He can be fake-friendly, if he needs to be. He can pretend with the best of them. But stamping down the uglier feelings inside him is a challenge.

He’s trying. Really. Emmett still seems a little taken aback by Will’s sudden, relative warmth, but if he thinks it’s weird he doesn’t say so.

Tonight, though... Tonight will be hard. Tonight they’re having one of their big campaigns. Emmett hasn’t been back to another campaign since that first time - at least, not a full one. Sometimes he’ll stick around for the beginning or appear for the tail end. But he hasn’t actually sat down and played with them since mid-October, and Will is really not looking forward to Emmett stepping neatly into Will’s place again, sitting there at the table like it’s *his* place, *his* tradition, *his* -

Boyfriend, Will reminds himself. His boyfriend. Emmett is Mike’s boyfriend, and Mike is allowed to invite people he likes to Party gatherings. They’ve invited people into the Party before - Max and El

are testaments to that. There's nothing wrong with Emmett joining them for the campaign.

Except that it's a special campaign. It's a holiday campaign, which means Mike put extra effort into it, extra time and care, and it's extra long. They're sitting down to start tonight, but they may be going into the early hours of the night, and more than likely starting up again sometime tomorrow before they're all dragged to their respective houses for family time. Holiday campaigns have special plot twists, they have character development. They're not supposed to have a random amateur butting in, slowing everyone down by not knowing the rules.

But it's fine. They're here to have a good time, and Will promised himself he'd be better about this, so he will be.

Tolerance, he reminds himself, trying to unwind his shoulders from where they were starting to hunch up near his ears. *You don't have to like it, but you have to be nice.*

"Oh, is this about the kitchen?" Mike says, picking up the last part of Emmett's sentence as they enter the basement.

"How'd you know? Was it the *pain in the ass* part?"

They share a *look*, like they're saying *hi, baby* with their eyes, and Will pointedly wanders away to find his soda.

Will has been weirdly chatty lately.

Not that Emmett *minds*, it's just... odd. Will's default setting seems to be either *prickly* or *pensive*, depending on the day. He hasn't really chatted Emmett up since the first time they met. That is, until about a week ago. All at once, he's been very buddy-buddy - at least, compared to Regular Will.

But Emmett doesn't have long to think about it before they're in the basement with the others, and Mike wanders over to bump him in greeting, and Will vanishes again in that silent-startling way of his. There one second, and then you turn to say something to him and

he's gone like he never existed, popping back up on the other side of the room a moment later.

The Party is gathered to play Dungeons and Dragons again. Emmett always wonders how they don't get bored of it. He's never been much of a fan of long, drawn-out board games. He refuses to play Monopoly, ever since that incident when he was twelve - although, to be fair, Danny deserved it - and long card games bore him. But Mike and his friends never seem to tire of it. He guesses it's the story aspect of it; no two games, no, *campaigns*, are the same. It's more like improvising a radio show than playing a board game.

Still, Emmett isn't as enthused about D&D as the rest of the group. It's fun most of the time, if he can manage to push through his shyness and force himself to voice-act with burning cheeks. He always feels ridiculous the whole time, like he's making a fool out of himself, but it's what's expected of him. It's what you're supposed to do in this game, and he wants these new friends to like him, so he does his best.

Mike, though. Mike is brilliant at this. He play-acts with an unselfconscious verve that Emmett rarely sees from him at school. Big gestures. Sound effects. He's acting to the rafters in a way that would make people laugh behind their hands, if they were in class, but they're not. They're with friends, and Mike doesn't seem to have a single wall up, not a single partition between his heart of hearts and the open air. Not here.

Emmett rests his chin on his hand, watching Mike ramp up, getting into character, putting on a well-practiced accent, eyes bright as he steps into the mask of a different person. Emmett can put up with D&D if it means he gets to watch Mike in his element. Frankly, it's almost better than the time they spend alone, lately.

Truth be told, Emmett is getting a little bored of Mike.

But that's not exactly a deal-breaker.

Emmett has no plans to break up with Mike. Because, a) he's not a person that rocks the boat, b) it's not like anything is *wrong* in their relationship per se, and c) what would Emmett do without Mike?

He's made some more friends since coming to Hawkins, sure, but they don't hang out as much as he and Mike do. Plus, losing Mike means losing Mike's friends, too, and Emmett has gotten kinda used to hanging around with the motley bunch. They're fun. They're funny, and generally welcoming, and they're decent people for what he can tell. Being around them reminds him, just a little, of hanging out with his band. The goofy inside jokes, the commiserating, playing off one another, feeding off each other's energy. They may not be *his* people, but... Any port in a storm.

And anyway, giving up a boyfriend in a town like this is like giving up a two dollar bill. You're never gonna see one again once again once you let go of it. Mike is a familiar and comforting presence in this strange town that Emmett is still getting used to. Mike is a warm body at Emmett's side, in his bed, a voice to fill the silence. They keep each other company and pass the hours together.

Mike keeps the tearing loneliness at bay, on days when Emmett would otherwise be falling further and further into his own inner hell of self blame and regret and *what-if* s. And maybe Emmett is Mike's shield against heartache, too. Emmett has caught him time and time again gazing off into the distance with an expression of sadness - or maybe longing - that he never quite explains. Maybe they're both just survivors, leaning on each other, relying on each other as they stumble through two different jungles.

And there's a kind of beauty in that, isn't there? *You're not who I want, not really, but maybe you're who I need. I'm not your soulmate, not your other half, we're not meant for each other, but I'm here. I'm here, and I'm with you, and we're going to get through this. You don't have to be alone. I'll hold you and keep your secrets safe, and we'll get through this.*

Isn't that enough?

He realizes all at once that several heads have turned his way. It must be his turn, and he wasn't paying attention. He says a phrase that usually works: "Can I do a perception check?"

"Roll," Mike says simply, and Emmett lets out a little breath of relief. He wasn't caught zoning out.

Emmett has clearly been zoning out for the past several minutes.

Will prides himself on not even rolling his eyes. He's been doing good. He oughta get himself a Frosty or something after this. Reward himself for not being a jerk.

It's sad that that's how far he's slipped. Treating himself for just being decent. But he's got to start somewhere, and he was right: tonight has been a challenge.

His turn is up after Emmett's. And Emmett's wizard already did some spellcasting, so at the risk of being repetitive, Will smiles through his teeth and says that he'll try to shoulder-slam the tower door open instead.

"Roll for strength," Mike says, and Will lobs the die onto the board.

1.

The whole party groans.

Not only does Will's Cleric take some damage, but the sound of him running-face first into the door draws every skeleton in the castle straight to them. Will's knee bounces under the table as Emmett widens his eyes to say, "Oh, that's, like, *really* bad, right?"

He realizes jealousy is pointless. He's known that all along. He hasn't been fair, he doesn't want to be that kind of person, and anyway, it's pointless. It's not like Mike is going to suddenly turn around and say, "*What have I been thinking? I don't love Emmett after all. I love you, Will. How did I not realize that? It's been you all along.*"

Will makes a face to himself, because even in his head, it sounds incredibly stupid. Saccharine. Like one of El's soap operas.

So he's been playing nice, trying to be good. He's been doing his best, really, it's just that this campaign is the last straw. D&D is *their* thing. They're the Cleric and the Paladin. Even before the Party formed - before they met Lucas and then Dustin - they were playing pretend in the woods behind Will's house, using branches as swords and walking sticks. D&D - fantasy, escapism, magic and nerdery - it's *their* thing.

And Emmett is invading it, doing *Will's* job, and then, for the first time, Will hears Mike open his mouth and say, "Hey, nice one, Em!"

And Will loses it. He can't sit here anymore, he can't just sit here and watch this. He needs a breather, or else he's *really* going to say something stupid.

He stands up from the table so suddenly that he jars it, sending figurines rattling, drawing every single pair of eyes.

"I need some air."

He's already moving towards the basement door, trying to temper his pace so he doesn't look as desperate as he feels. He doesn't think it's working very well. For once, he wishes he did smoke. Then at least he'd have an excuse to step out.

"Don't wait for me. El, would you roll for me if I'm not back by next turn?"

He doesn't know if she nods or not. He's already out, pushing the door gently closed behind him and stepping out into the dry, cold pinch of a late autumn night.

Em. A nickname. Does Mike have a nickname for Will? He doesn't think so. Even when they were little, he was just... Will.

He can't take it anymore. The lies, the secrecy. The sneaking around. Knowing what's going on and never being able to say it. Looking at his best friend and *knowing* that Mike is lying to his face, *oh, I have a meeting for drama, I have to go shopping with my mom, Emmett needs help with an essay.* Second to the jealousy, that's what stings most. The lies. He thought they trusted each other. He thought, if Mike would tell anyone in the world about his boyfriend, it would be Will.

But apparently not.

He's a couple houses away, zipping up his jacket as he paces along the sidewalk, when he hears the distant sound of a door opening.

Will is partway up the street when Mike spots him.

Mike is a little surprised to find him wandering like this. Usually Will avoids the streets at night, this time of year. Is he having a panic attack? He jolted up and fled so suddenly, Mike thought that *must* be it. But now, as he calls out and jogs to catch up, Will's breathing is steady and his eyes are clear.

"Hey," Mike says, a little breathless from jogging, and pulls up beside him. "You okay?"

Will stops. "Yeah."

All the windows are closed and curtained against the cold. No one is out. They're alone on the cracked pavement, standing in a bar of yellow streetlight glow, sandwiched between an empty curve of road and a huge, overgrown shrub that's creeping over someone's fence.

Will is tense, rocking back and forth in place, looking off down the dark street. A single car crunches past, and he watches it go. And then, without looking at Mike, without even taking a breath first, he says, "Are you dating someone?"

Mike's heart does a funny little jump in his chest. His fingers start to go cold. He forgot to bring gloves, or even a jacket, running out after Will. The cold seeps straight through his sweatshirt like he's not even wearing it, giving him goosebumps.

"No?" He gives Will his best *I'm confused* grin. "Why?"

Will's head turns, finally looking at him. "Really?"

Another little jolt, another, stronger sinking feeling. *Oh no*, Mike thinks, *oh, fuck, no*, but - Will doesn't necessarily know. This might not be what it seems like. "Yeah." He shrugs, then stuffs his hands in his jeans pockets under the guise of warming them up. "Why?"

Will pulls a flat, annoyed expression which, Mike knows from experience, belies a much deeper emotion. "Because I think you're lying."

Mike laughs, humorlessly - an instinctual reaction to cover how his voice has begun to tremor just slightly. "I'm not."

That was the wrong thing to say. He should have made up a story, some girl from school, dates, hickies over lunch break. Months ago, he had the story ready, always on the tip of his tongue just in case anybody started noticing something was up. But as the time went by and no one said anything, he got lazy. He got sloppy, and he forgot his alibi. And now instead of saying something smart, his mind is blank and his pulse is kicking in his throat and all he can think to do is dig in his heels and deny even harder as Will looks at him skeptically.

"I'm not! Why is this an issue? What's your problem?"

He's protesting too much, too vehemently, and he knows he's giving himself away with every word. Will's eyes are blank, cold, showing nothing but an empty disappointment. This is all going downhill so fast.

"My problem," Will echoes, then twists away for a moment with a dry laugh. He paces another concrete square away, putting distance between them, and when he turns there's light in his eyes again. But not the good kind. "*My problem.*" He laughs again, an uncharacteristically harsh laugh, and Mike is starting to panic.

What is this? Is this about Halloween? Is he finally getting bit in the ass for that? Did Will see something? Did he walk around a corner at just the wrong moment? Is Will really about to chew him out for... No. Will wouldn't. Right? Even if he did know, somehow, even though they've been so careful... Will would never. Sure, he didn't have such a great experience in middle school, so of course he wouldn't want to be associated with people like Mike, but he would never actually do any of the things that are flashing through Mike's mind. The yelling, the personal attacks, the slurs. Not Will. Will has never said that kind of thing before. He defended Emmett the other day when Lucas was kind of a jerk. He's kind. He's gentle. He's Mike's best friend. He wouldn't do this.

Would he?

"Hey," Mike says, speaking through a voice trembling badly through the hard pulse in his throat. "It's really cold out here, why don't we go -"

“You really didn’t have to lie to me.”

He’s stuck, frozen, too terrified to think straight. Like a rabbit watching a hawk circle overhead. He can’t come up with any way forward, anything that would salvage this, so he just repeats his stuck-record loop again. “Look, Will, I don’t know what you’re -”

Will whirls on him. “Why won’t you just tell me? Just, fuck, damn it, Mike! Why won’t you just fucking tell me?”

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no.

Will is realizing that he’s been having sleepovers and sharing food with a queer this whole time, all these years, and he’s furious. He’s thinking about all the spit they’ve swapped via straws and cups, all the times they’ve slept in the same room together, and there’s bile creeping up his throat. He’s thinking of all the names he got called as a kid, all the times he got a nasty note taped to his backpack or locker, all the times he got tripped or shoved with a word hissed in his ear - *fairy. Freak. Fag. Zombie Boy.* And now here’s Mike, standing right in front of him. The embodiment of all that.

“What is your problem?” Mike wavers. He’s still clinging, hopelessly, stubbornly, to ignorance. “What do you want me to say?”

The tension boils over, and Will finally snaps. Not loud and demonstrative like Mike. Oh, no. When Will really snaps, he gets terrifyingly quiet.

“When were you gonna tell me?” He’s looking Mike straight in the eyes, palms outturned like he can’t believe how Mike could *possibly* trick him like that all their lives. Like he’s grappling with the enormity of the betrayal. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Mike can’t run. He has nothing to hide behind anymore. All he can do is confront this head-on.

So he gets angry. It’s the only thing he has left.

“Yeah,” he spits, turning on a dime and clearly surprising Will with the sudden venom. “Yeah, you know what? I am.”

Will processes the turnaround for a beat, then says, “Emmett.”

“No fucking shit.” Will opens his mouth to say something else, but Mike’s not done. “Yeah, you caught me. Congratulations. You won the prize! He is my boyfriend. We have been fucking. Okay? Are you happy? Do you feel better now?”

Will just shakes his head. Eyes hard. “When the hell were you going to tell me?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware that my love life was your -”

“Well it hasn’t exactly been a walk in the park.”

Mike is about to say, *What does that mean?* But he doesn’t need to. Will is on a roll, like he’s had these words in his throat for a long time, turning them around and planning them, just waiting to let them out.

“I have to sit there *every day* watching you make eyes at Mr. Bleach Blonde Rainbow Pin -”

“*Whoa* - ”

“Just hoping and praying that he’s not feeling you up under the table or some shit -”

Mike flinches, *hating* the curl of disgust on Will’s lip, and anger blooms hot and bright as a mushroom cloud in his chest. “Fuck you, Will. You know what, fuck you. You don’t get to do this.” Will says something that Mike talks straight over, not bothering to listen. “You know, I was just starting to be okay with myself. Just a little bit. You know? Like, yeah, okay, I’m a queer and a fucking freak and I can’t ever let anyone know or else they’d think I was disgusting and h-hate me and -”

He stutters on a dry sob and swallows back the rest, not even sure where he’s going or what he wants to say, and launches onto another track. Pacing, gesturing. Because if he stops, all that awful energy will burst out some other way.

“But I was doing okay. I was figuring it out. The whole world is

bullshit anyway, so why should I fucking care what they -?"

"Mike, wait, that's not -"

"And then for once, for *once*, something good happens. Just this *one* thing. And you don't get to shit all over it just because you're still upset about some stupid fucking bullies in middle school. You don't get to, Will."

"I didn't m-"

"No."

Mike points at Will like he's ordering the words back, stopping them before they come. He knows he's not being fair, that he's not portraying things as they really are, and he doesn't give two shits. He's angry, hot and inflexible as steel, and it's the only thing keeping him standing. Without the anger he'd collapse, fold in half, crumple to the sidewalk and sob with shame and loss and mortification and deep, cutting betrayal. So he feeds the fires and stays angry.

He's so cold. His torso is taut as a wire, and he's shivering as the biting frost of the air seems to seep through his skin and straight into him.

"Whatever you're gonna say, save it. I'm queer." He spreads his arms, face twisting in a sardonic grimace. "Sorry. But you're gonna have to deal with that. Or just - stay the hell out of my life, I guess."

He didn't mean to say that last part, hadn't planned it before it came out of his mouth in a snarling fit of defiance, and a cold, sinking dread flashes through him as soon as he does. He wants to take it back, snatch the words out of the air and swallow them again. He wants to say, *No, wait, not that part*.

But it's too late. Will is looking at him with a shell-shocked, unreadable expression that could be heartbreak or disbelief or thinly veiled disgust and annoyance. Mike has always had a glass face, every emotion showing through unless he makes a real effort to conceal them, but Will has never been half as easy to read. Especially because, when everything gets to be too much, he shuts down.

Whatever might be happening inside, his automatic defense is to put on a mask. He's wearing one now, and Mike wants to grasp him by the shoulders and shake him until it slips, until he can see what's going on behind the glazed look in his eyes. He wants to rage and shout and scream until his voice gives out, and he wants to fling himself to his knees and beg for forgiveness, beg Will to *please* just accept this, accept *him*, or better yet forget any of this ever happened. He wants, more desperately than anything, to go back in time and correct whatever moment led to this. Instead, he just shakes his head and turns away, unable to bear that *look* any longer, whatever the hell it is.

He wants to walk away, take his hollow victory and run, but the words in his chest are so acute that they push themselves out without his permission. "You know, you're supposed to be my *best friend*. You're supposed to look out for me, and -" His voice is cracking, quickly running to tears, and he fights them back viciously. "And out of all people - out of *all people*, I really thought I could count on you."

He is crying now, not sobbing - at the very least he's not sobbing - but the tears won, silently overflowing, wetting his cheeks and blurring his vision. They're hot on his skin, and then cold as they cool in the frigid air, then hot again as more come.

There's a sheen on Will's face, like maybe he's crying too, but Mike won't look at him long enough to find out. He fixes his eyes on the sidewalk as he walks past, very narrowly resisting the urge to slam Will's shoulder with his own on the way by.

"I'm sorry my relationship is such a fucking *eyesore* for you."

"Mike -"

Will is coming after him. He can hear the rhythm of hurried footsteps, the shuffle of Will's jacket. He can sense Will's shadow at his shoulder, close enough to feel his body heat, tripping a little as Mike's pace increases.

"Mike, *wait*, I didn't mean -"

“Like hell.”

“Jesus, just let me fucking *talk* - ”

Mike whirls on him. “You already did! Okay? Plenty! You already made it *pretty damn clear* what you think, so just -”

Tears 2, Mike 0.

“Just get away from me. And stay away from me.”

And the worst part is, Will does. He stops walking, stops trying to catch Mike or keep up, and when Mike looks back - just once, just as he’s about to round the curve and approach his own yard - he’s sitting on the curb, head down, shoulders shaking.

Notes for the Chapter:

♪ When you try your best but you don't succeed... ♪

Let's all just ignore the fact that I wrote other things for 6 months, mmkay?

As always, I'd love to hear any and all of your thoughts! (If anyone's still here after that hiatus, lol)

6. The Play

Notes for the Chapter:

Did I literally forget that Mike and Will were both supposed to be involved in the play until the chapter it became relevant? Yes. Am I gonna change it? No.

“You think Will is gay?”

Emmett says it so casually, speaking over the lip of his coffee cup just before taking a sip, that Mike wonders if he heard right. When he looks, Emmett’s head is tilted and his brows are scrunched up in an attitude better fit for casually wondering aloud about conspiracy theories than for suggesting... *that*. As if he just said, *You think aliens really landed in New Mexico?* or *You think they really make chicken nuggets out of the whole mashed-up chicken?*

Mike swallows his own sip, sure he misheard. “What?”

Emmett swirls his disposable cup. It’s the first day back after break, and Mike bought them both coffee before school. Emmett has a test in second period today, and he wanted to be supportive. Who couldn’t use a little extra caffeine to get the brain working? Plus, it earned him a grateful smile and a quick kiss, hidden away in the seldom-traversed hallway behind the drama department.

They’re sitting on the floor of the main hall now, leaning against the wall under a display case and watching the general student body flow back and forth. The deafening human white noise of shouted chatter, overlapped with slamming lockers and sneakers squeaking on recently waxed school floors, drowns out their words. Maybe Mike got Emmett’s words mixed up with something somebody else said as they passed by.

But no, Emmett just swallows and says again, “Will. You think maybe he’s gay?”

“What? No.” Mike finds himself sending an automatic glare over his drink. The same glare he would have sent Troy or James for hissing

something in Will's ear in the hallway, or Lonnie for existing in Will's general proximity. "Jesus, Mitch. The hell."

"No, I'm -" He puts his hands up, lifting his coffee as if in surrender. "I'm just saying. Has he ever had a girlfriend? Have you ever heard him rate girls with Dustin and Lucas? Because I haven't. And, you know, a lot of gay guys are homophobic before they -"

"All right, all right, enough already!"

"Okay, sorry." Emmett rolls his eyes and drops it with a mutter of, "Geez. Grumpy."

"He's not like that," Mike insists, because he has the sneaking feeling that his boyfriend doesn't believe him. "He's *not*. He had a girlfriend in 8th grade, and he *already* gets shit for -"

"Not like us, you mean," Emmett interrupts, a rare note of annoyance sneaking into the edges of his tone. "Mike, *we're* like that." He makes finger-quotes around the last two words, and Mike sighs into his hands.

"I know, I just - that's not what I mean."

A memory flashes through his mind - "*Mike, wait, I didn't mean -*" - and Mike shakes it away.

"He gets shit for that kind of stuff all the time," he starts over. "I mean, he used to. I guess he still does sometimes. But just because he's an artist and he doesn't blatantly ogle girls' tits doesn't mean -"

"An artist? What does art have to do with it?"

Mike tosses his hands, forgetting his coffee and almost spilling it. "I dunno, it's just what people say!"

The three-minute warning bell rings, effectively ending the conversation, and they both stand and haul their backpacks to their shoulders. Emmett looks like he still has something to say, but he doesn't say it.

It was a long weekend.

The Party never did finish their Thanksgiving campaign. Will didn't come back after their fight - not that Mike wanted to see him anyway - and the Party hesitantly, awkwardly cleared away the board after a couple hours, promising to finish it later. Dustin and El went after Will to see if he was okay. Mike doesn't know what he said to them, but no one has come banging on his door with accusations yet, so he assumes Will didn't out him.

Thanksgiving passed without incident. It's easy to ignore the rest of your life when you're being whirled through a busy holiday, full of visiting family and heaps of chores and cooking and keeping an eye on little cousins. It was his mom's turn to host Thanksgiving, this year, so the living room was full of dozing grandparents, the family room was full of yelling aunts and uncles watching football, and the basement was full of cousins. Mike's hands were full trying to keep a herd of small-to-midsize children from hurling themselves off the staircase or pulling each other's hair out. But then came the weekend, relatives leaving one by one until the house was empty again, and Mike can't think of a single Thanksgiving break that he and Will haven't had a sleepover - until this one.

It doesn't help that the Party knows they fought. Of course they do, how could they not? They don't know what the fight was *about*, but they know it was bad.

Most of them assume it was something to do with the Upside Down. Mike coddled Will too much, was too concerned for him, and Will snapped. *You don't need to hover over my shoulder all the time, I'm fine, I can handle it.* The usual mantra. Except, Will has almost never had that argument with *Mike*. Not nearly as often as he has it with his mom, or his brother, or sometimes Dustin or El.

But, as far as the Party knows, what else would it have been?

So things have been awkward. And Mike has been avoiding the Party just in case Will is there. And Emmett was spending time with his family for the weekend. So Mike was alone.

Which gave him plenty of time to stew. Pacing, clenching his jaw,

rehashing the argument over and over in his head, occasionally arguing back aloud if no one else was home.

Like picking at a scab, it kept the wounds raw.

Mike would never admit it - not to El, not to Emmett, not to Nancy, and certainly *not* to fucking Will - but he's cried about half a dozen times in the last four days. Usually under the cover of darkness, alone in his room where he can pull a pillow over his face and muffle any noise.

It wouldn't hurt so much if it had been anyone else. Max. Lucas. Hell, his own big sister. If it had been someone else, maybe Mike could have cried once and then moved on to resentment and been done with it. Whatever. Fuck what they think. He knew what he was signing up for, when he got himself into this. He knows exactly what the world thinks of people like him. He was prepared for a little pushback. A little karma. If it had been anyone else, maybe he'd be okay by now.

But it wasn't anyone else. It was Will. Will, who he might be closer to than anyone else in the whole wide world. Will, who has been in his life since they were practically toddlers. Who used to crawl into Mike's bed when they had sleepovers, back when they were too little to be allowed to sleep in the basement yet. Who wept silently on Mike's shoulder in the emergency room, that day that Joyce collapsed and nobody was quite sure what was wrong yet. Who has never missed a birthday party, never told Mike to *get over it* or *calm down already* when he gets riled up or excited about something.

Who attacked him for what's probably the deepest insecurity he has, the most tender and vulnerable wound in his psyche. A huge part of his identity, of who he *is*, that he was just *barely* starting to come to terms with.

Maybe it wouldn't have affected him quite as badly if it hadn't been so surprising. A week ago, if Mike had been forced at gunpoint to choose someone to come out to, he would have chosen Will. He thought Will would understand. He thought Will wouldn't care, at least not *that* much. He thought, if they ever had that conversation, it would end with a firm, *just don't go getting me involved, okay? I don't*

need the rumors, a laugh, and a hug.

Instead he got *that*.

But you know what? This is good. This is... this is closure. It's a solid answer. An avalanche finally blocking off the road he's been gazing down for ages and ages. If ever there was a great big neon sign from the universe, this is it. There's no hope of having anything with Will, ever. That's beyond obvious now. Will was disgusted by him - disgusted by the mere suggestion, angry enough at the mere *thought* of Mike and Emmett together that he was visibly recoiling from it. It's like the universe grabbed Mike by the ankles, suplexed him onto the ground, and smashed a sign into his face that read, *HE'S NEVER GOING TO LOVE YOU, YOU PATHETIC MORON!*

So, that's it. Clearly, holding onto this stupid childhood crush is pointless. He's not thirteen anymore.

And he wants his best friend back. He wants things to go back to normal, back to the way they've always been.

Just not yet. First he wants to sulk for a good long time, nursing his wounds, and then he wants an apology - and it better be a damn good one, complete with groveling and something intensely sugary offered as a sacrifice - and then he wants to spend half an hour telling Will exactly why he was an asshole and just how much it hurt, loudly and in no uncertain terms.

Thankfully, until then - if it ever happens, if their whole friendship didn't just go down like a house of cards - he has a distraction.

The school play is coming up faster than anyone would have believed. There have been more after-school meetings than usual, lately, because the drama department is hard at work with their last stretch of rehearsals. They're full-costume almost every time, now, and Mike knows his lines by heart. He delivers them under his breath to no one, occasionally, walking down the street or through school hallways.

It's convenient. It gives him something to focus on, it gives him an excuse not to hang out with the Party - "Sorry, guys, I can't, I have

rehearsal!" - and it's a positive, fun, bright spot in his otherwise rather morose life right now.

The one downside: Will works backstage, with the crew. Mike has been studiously avoiding or ignoring him, but every once in a while he'll happen to glance up and see a very familiar silhouette next to a half-familiar one. Another guy from the cast. Theo. He has a larger role than Mike, so he's onstage for most of the production. Mike has seen him chatting with Will before, just... has it always been this frequent?

Whatever. He doesn't care. He's ignoring Will.

Until one day, when Emmett stops by the drama department to say hi.

They haven't quite started rehearsal yet; most of the cast and crew is in the drama classroom, waiting for Mr. Mello to show up and give them their pre-rehearsal notes and areas of focus. Mike is about to enter the classroom himself when something snags his backpack. For a split second he thinks he's caught on a locker, and then the snag starts to pull, and he finds himself whirled around a corner.

"Really?" he laughs, knowing who it is before he even stumbles against his boyfriend. "You're gonna surprise-attack me *right* before rehearsal? You know, when they say *break a leg*, they don't mean it literally."

Emmett just gives a mischievous grin, checks over their shoulders and starts tugging him along the narrow hallway towards backstage. Where there aren't likely to be many people yet. "What? I'm just here to be supportive."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?"

They slip into the dark, dusty space behind and below the stage. Black floors, black walls. Props clumped strategically here and there. Mike will never understand how a space so often traversed can have such constant dust bunnies.

"You busy today?" Emmett probes, and Mike hums with a touch of

regret.

“Yeah, I’ll probably be here a while. We’re coming up on showtime, you know.”

“Hm. Mmkay.”

They take their traditional glance around. It’s too risky to do much here, now, with no locked doors and the threat of someone else walking around a corner any second. Even a kiss is chancy. But they can sneak just one, if it’s quick and if they keep their ear out for footsteps. Maybe two.

Mike starts to tilt in, lifting his face just slightly to align with the taller boy’s - and then an electric shock jolts through his body as he notices a human figure in his peripheral vision. He starts to step back, as quickly and casually as he can, hoping beyond hope he can pass the almost-kiss off as a joke, or maybe he was just getting a piece of lint off of Emmett’s -

Oh, thank fuck.

Oh, no.

It’s Will. His arms full with an unwieldy set piece, his ears covered by headphones. He’s about three yards away, having clearly just stepped out of the prop closet, and Mike can hear the tinny beat of angry music from here.

His eyes flit from Mike to Emmett to the ground, lips tightening.

And a little vengeful fire lights up in Mike’s belly.

Oh, you don’t want to see that? he thinks, turning resolutely back to his boyfriend and muttering, “Just Will.” *Too bad.*

Emmett stiffens up a little as Mike kisses him, in full view of their audience, but he doesn’t duck away. In fact, he slowly thaws, pushing his hands around Mike’s hips and into his back pockets as Mike slips his tongue past his boyfriend’s lips. If Will is going to make *that* face when he sees Mike with his boyfriend, you can bet your ass he’s getting an eyeful. Whether he likes it or not.

He can't hear anything to his right. No footsteps, no movement, nothing except the muffled electronic strains of Will's walkman to let Mike know that his (ex-?) best friend is still standing there. It's like he's not even breathing.

Then a door clicks to his left, and they disengage with a spike of adrenaline and a practiced step back, standing a socially acceptable two and a half feet apart by the time Melissa Eaton power-walks around the corner, muttering her lines and ignoring them completely on the way by.

Mike takes a single glance at Will before he and Emmett beat their retreat. Will's eyes are on his shoes, like maybe he didn't see any of it. But he did. Mike knows he was watching. He can tell by how beet-red Will's face is, how his breath lifts his chest under his shirt just a little more rapidly than before.

Good, Mike thinks, smug, as they round the corner and burst out into the well-lit drama hallway full of people. *Hope that's burned on your eyelids for a long time.*

"Holy shit, Mike," Emmett rasps, clutching a hand to his heart. He sounds either horrified or delighted; Mike can't tell which it is.

"It's not like he didn't know," he half-whispers back. Mr. Mello's voice is calling the cast and crew into the classroom, and Mike slaps Emmett's shoulder - one of the few gestures of affection they can get away with in the public eye. "I have to go. See you tomorrow, yeah?"

"Yeah." Emmett still sounds a little dazed, and Mike waves to him before tightening his backpack straps and plunging into the crowd.

He should have expected that. He really should have expected Will to show up. He keeps trying to corner Mike in quiet moments, seeking him out at lunch and before school, and Mike keeps slipping away and avoiding him. He can't do that yet. He can't have that conversation with Will right now, or any conversation with him. Everything is still way too fresh, way too raw.

Once in the classroom, he's immediately flagged down by Alex, a pretty, dark-haired girl who has several exchanges with Mike's

character in Act II. She's clutching her script, a pencil in the other hand, talking at a mile a minute as she goes over their blocking with him. Mike is so focused that he doesn't even see Will slip in the door until Mr. Mello hollers for quiet and Mike looks up to find a pair of hazel eyes skipping hastily away from him.

Well that was... unexpected.

As a rule of thumb, Mike is high-strung and twitchy as a racehorse when it comes to PDA. He never lets them hold hands in public, no matter if there's nobody really around, he won't hear a word about telling his friends about them, he insists on closing the curtains before they make out in Emmett's room - as if anyone is going to stand at *just* the right angle, crane their neck up, and stare into an attic window to see if two guys are grinding on the couch.

Hey, not everyone is ready to come out yet. Not everybody *can* come out. Emmett gets that. No hard feelings there. And it's not like he wants to go sit in the bleachers during a pep rally and make out in front of the entire school population. He's not ashamed of who he is. He decided that the day his mother banished his father from their house, screaming at him in a way he had never once heard from her in his life. But there are consequences to being who he is. Just a fact of life. If you're gonna be in the kitchen you gotta be prepared to deal with some heat, and Emmett already gets enough of that from the rumors, the whispers and dirty looks. Guys not-so-subtly swerving to avoid him in the hallways, sometimes. Knowing glances. He supposes he should mark it as a milestone, collecting his first small following of bullies in this new school.

So, he gets it. Mike has a reputation to uphold, friends who make some questionable jokes sometimes, and conservative parents. He has good reasons for keeping any affection between them out of sight.

Except for just now.

Emmett knows that Will saw them. And he knows that Mike knows.

It makes him a little uncomfortable, truth be told. He's not exactly out to Will. Not officially. But then again, he's pretty sure Will knew,

even before he and Mike's big argument the other day. He had been so sure Will was flirting, that first day they met, in the cabin. And ever since, he's been keeping an eye out. Watching what Will watches, listening to how he phrases things. Emmett likes to think he has a pretty good radar for other queers, and Will is lighting up like a Christmas tree under his covert observation.

Plus, as he tried to say to his boyfriend this morning, people can be surprisingly homophobic before they come out - or before they even admit to themselves what they've been repressing. Fighting themselves. Preemptively fighting other people's opinions.

It's just a theory.

It's entirely possible that he's just grasping at straws, overanalyzing Will's behavior, because... He's always been a little jealous of Will. Look, it's pretty obvious that Mike likes this guy. Might even love him. But like... hey, that's fair, right? Half the reason Emmett got together with Mike was to help get over his ex, and it's not like Emmett is planning on making any huge commitments.

Still, it's a little aggravating to look over and see *his* boyfriend staring at Will Byers with big, soft eyes and that particular smile that he's never given to Emmett - like Will put the stars in the sky or some shit.

That is, until just recently. Until Mike stormed back into the basement after running out after Will - after Will leapt up from the table and burst out the door like an insane person - and announced loudly that the campaign was over. He was on the verge of tears, choking when the Party pressed him about what happened. He told the Party half the story. And then, later, he told Emmett all of it.

From what Mike said, it sounds like a classic case of internalized homophobia. The yelling, the apparent disgust. And Will is otherwise such a soft spoken guy; why get so heated and defensive about *this* in particular? He hasn't struck Emmett as violently homophobic before, so why come to a shouting match about it now? Is there perhaps more going on than meets the eye?

He tried floating the idea past Mike, but Mike would hear none of it.

So Emmett let it drop.

Emmett bounces, adjusting his backpack, and plods on. It's deeply cold, today, but dry. He's still not used to how dry the air is. As the weather got colder, the skin of his hands started to dry until they cracked and bled in some places. He had to start remembering to use lotion to keep them from tearing themselves apart. It's like even the air itself has some animosity for him.

They're in Emmett's room. It's late; Mike's parents think he's at a sleepover with Dustin. Emmett's mom and aunt are probably asleep by now, and even if they're not, this is an old house. The walls are thick.

They've been making out on his bed, trying to ignore the way his cat stares at them creepily from across the room. Emmett has been gradually pushing them further, nipping at Mike's lip and sliding hot palms up under his shirt and down to the curve of his ass. Mike has been thinking.

When Mike told Will that he and Emmett have been fucking, it was a bit of an exaggeration. They haven't quite crossed that line yet.

Emmett has been willing. Mike... well, it's been a little too overwhelming to consider, and frankly a little too scary. He feels like an idiot saying it like that. He's not *scared*, he's just... nervous. It's a lot. Even when Emmett offers over and over to bottom (a term that Mike only recently learned, with burning ears and neck), Mike always hesitated, teetering, unable to say yes but unwilling to say no.

And Emmett - sweet, wonderful, easygoing Emmett - never once pushed. He'd just shrug and smile and say, "Okay."

And that was that.

But now, even Mike is getting fed up with himself. This is the second time since his argument with Will that Emmett has not-so-subtly hinted. Last time Mike deflected, as usual.

This time, it's like a switch flips.

Emmett mutters, "Got some time?" as if he could be talking about, oh, anything really, video games or walking... or sex.

His hand has been resting on the cheek of Mike's ass as they make out, and now it flexes a degree, and a shiver runs up Mike's body. And something in the back of his mind spits, *oh, just do it already, stop being such a drag. Stop being such a baby. It's just sex. People do it all the time. Just say yes already.*

He really has been keeping Emmett waiting for a while. Of course, they have blowjobs, hand jobs. Dry humping. All of that, frequently. And, not quite as frequently, fingering. Emmett showed him how months ago. It really shouldn't be such a huge step from *that* to actual sex, should it? Why has he put it off for so long? His boyfriend *must* be getting annoyed with him by now, despite how even-keeled he is on the surface. What has he been waiting for?

He knows what he's been waiting for. He knows *who* he's been waiting for. But now that small, lingering ember of hope has finally, mercifully, been extinguished. Now, there's nothing in his way. Nothing holding him back from kissing his boyfriend, hot and heavy, and murmuring, "All the time in the world."

Emmett pulls Mike's hand toward himself with a whisper: "Help me out, babe?"

But Mike takes a small breath, his pulse full-tilt and off-kilter, and pushes it out before he can talk himself out of it. "I was thinking you should fuck me."

Emmett freezes, eyes wide, expression sliding through *confused* to *surprised* to *delighted*. Mike's stomach turns over, whether with nerves or anticipation he can't tell, as Emmett's face lights up in a grin.

"Really?"

Mike nods.

"Really?"

“Yeah,” Mike exhales, the word itself half a jittery laugh. “I want to.”

“Baby!”

Emmett pulls him in by the face and kisses him again, messy and ecstatic, and Mike thinks, *this is okay. This is good.*

And then Emmett is breaking away in a whirl of activity, finding the lube and shucking his own pants like a shot, and Mike is laughing at his fumbling enthusiasm, and before he can quite process what’s happening he’s being pressed gently back on the mattress and told to relax as Emmett’s fingers begin the new-familiar process of working him open. And if Mike has to concentrate a little harder than usual to stay hard, and if there’s a tightness in his chest, a small but persistent sense of wrongness, it’s only because he’s never done this before. He shoves those thoughts down and loops his arms around Emmett’s neck, and within a few seconds he’s far too overpowered by physical sensations to have any room for thoughts anyway.

At first, Will had meant to corner Mike *before* the play. But then, halfway through his drive to school - his mom lent him the car, since he’ll be out relatively late - he suddenly cursed and slapped the steering wheel. *Idiot.* Force Mike into that conversation? *Right* before the first showing of the play? No. He can’t distract Mike now. Will is nervous enough himself, sweating bullets under his shirt as his mind races over all the things that could go wrong, every single step that needs to be accomplished in a precise order. And he’s not the one on the stage, in those hot lights, with who knows how many people attentively watching.

No. He can’t distract Mike before *that*.

He’ll wait until after. He doesn’t think he can stand another weekend like this, let alone another week, but... a few hours. He can wait a few hours. It gives him some more time to rehearse the words in his head, anyway. And until then, he’ll give Mike the space that he’s been so stubbornly insisting upon.

And that works great, right up until Alan storms up to Will in a panic, huffing and puffing, his face red from exertion. “Byers! Thank god,

you're here."

Will frowns as he peels off his coat and throws it into a corner of the drama room. No time for neatness right now, it's go time. "Shit, am I late?"

"No, but Annie just called. She's got food poisoning out the ass. Probably literally. She can't come."

Will groans. "Oh, no."

Annie works alongside Will backstage. During the actual production she works with the lighting team, but she's also been acting as part of the makeup department. With such a small school, and an even smaller drama department, everyone has to double-up on duties here and there.

"You've worked makeup before, right?"

Will pulls an uncertain face. "Not much, but I can."

"Good. Help Tiffany. Go. Go."

Alan gives him a little shove, and for the next half hour or so, Will has his hands full. Every single member of cast and crew is high-strung, either excited or nauseated or both. The general chaos is deafening, and Will is just focused on doing the best he can with a grand total of two previous shifts on the makeup rotation. Thankfully Tiffany has most of it covered, so Will just has to pick up the simplest tasks. Basic stage makeup. Eyeliner, powder, and blush for everyone, and lipstick for the girls. Not too complicated.

He's doing pretty well, if he does say so himself, until he turns and finds Mike next in line.

They give each other a startled look - which is dumb, it's not like they didn't know the other was here. Then Will smooths his face into a professional, impassive mask, and says, "Sit here."

Mike sits, a little stiffly. Will takes a breath, needlessly straightens his tools, and says, "Right. Um. Hold still."

He works quickly and carefully. There are other actors who need their makeup done, too, and he won't hold up the line just because his hands are shaking just a little. The thing about makeup is, you kind of have to be close. Really close. And as much as Will tries to maintain a respectful distance, there's no way he can do this without getting right in Mike's face, staring intently at the features he knows as well as his own reflection. Smelling Mike's special-occasion cologne mixed with the tang of a nervous sweat. Telling him to look up, look down, close his eyes as Will gently lines his eyes with black.

God, I hope I'm doing this right, he thinks, bracing the heel of his hand softly on Mike's cheek so his fingers don't shake as he traces out the liner. On top of everything, he *cannot* make his best friend look stupid to go up onstage. Not now. He thinks he'd just call it quits and flee the country if that happened.

The worst part is, Mike is a statue on the stool, tense and twitching as a horse in the stargate. He's trying not to show it. His hands are flat on his knees, maybe so they don't clench and maybe so his costume absorbs the sweat from his palms, and his breathing is deep and even. But Will knows Mike. He knows that's exactly what Mike does when he's trying to hide his nerves or discomfort. And he hates that it's because of *him*. Mike is uncomfortable just being around Will, just being close to him. He thinks that Will finds him repulsive. He thinks that Will is standing near him, almost between his knees, touching his face, and thinking, *ugh, gross. Can't wait until this is over.*

But what can he do? It's not the right time, and there are too many people around to lean down and whisper, *"I don't think any of those things about you, Mikey. Please believe me. Please don't look so uncomfortable. It's just me. I don't mind touching you. I don't mind being close to you. I want to be so much closer to you."*

All he can say, as he finishes up with a sigh of relief - that doesn't look half bad - is a paltry, "Good luck."

"Yeah." Mike hops off the stool like it burned him. "You too."

Then he's gone, and someone else is in the stool.

Will poked his head out to scan the audience just once. The Party was there, except for Max, who had to go visit relatives with her mom and promised she'd come to tomorrow's show. And Emmett was there. His hair, silvery with dark roots growing in, is distinctive in the sea of brown, black, and blonde.

Now, Will gnaws at a hangnail until it bleeds, anxious and fidgety, and tries to keep up his conversation with another member of the crew until the lights flash twice. Warning everyone to get to their seats.

He doesn't have much time to think about personal problems as the production runs. Hallelujah for that. He's too busy running back and forth backstage, keeping the show running with the rest of the crew, averting a crisis here and there. But every once in a while, he catches Mike's voice. And when he can, he listens.

Mike's part isn't huge. But he's always been good with an audience. Good at projecting a sort of presence, drawing people in with whatever he's pretending this time. It's been like that since they were little kids on the playground, pretending to be superheroes, or Robin Hood's merry men, or Luke and Han.

An hour has gone by before he knows what's happening. And then all at once the final scene is playing out, and Will is stunned to find the cast bowing and the curtains closing and the audience applauding with varying degrees of politeness or enthusiasm. He's pretty sure he hears Lucas whooping, which makes him roll his eyes with a grin.

But then backstage is a rush of activity, chaos, everyone zig-zagging, actors climbing out of their costumes and into street clothes so they can go celebrate with their friends and family in the audience. And without planning it, without thinking through his next course of action, Will finds himself fording the mob, eyes straining for one particular head of dark, wavy hair. Ears perked for one particular voice.

He has to talk to Mike. *Now*, before he goes out to Emmett and the Party, because Will knows he won't get a second glance after that. Emmett will sweep Mike away, and Will won't see him until at least Monday and who knows how long after that it'll take for Mike to

even *look* at him, and -

No.

He can't. He can't go another whole weekend, another whole week or longer with this awful acid residue bubbling in his chest. He has to set things right, *now*, or he might just lose his mind.

He finds Mike in street clothes, smiling as someone shouts something to him and making a beeline for the doors. Will has to dodge straight through someone's conversation and squeeze between someone else and a wall to make it in time, snagging Mike's sleeve and blurting, "Wait."

Mike's smile falters, his adrenaline-fueled happiness winking out of existence as he sees Will, and Will's stomach constricts into a tight little knot.

"What?" Mike says simply, dully.

Will tries to gather his courage, even though his face feels cold and his hands are clammy. "I need to talk to you."

Mike gives him an unimpressed stare. People flow around them, on all sides of them, like they're in the eye of a hurricane. "Okay."

Will wants to tack on, *alone*, but it sounds too forceful and he's too terrified of losing this chance, so he hems and haws and eventually wavers, "Could we maybe go somewhere quieter?"

"Why don't we talk here?" Mike's arms are crossed, almost defensively, and Will resists the urge to claw at his own face in frustration.

"No, just - please, Mike."

That catches his attention, and he stares Will hard in the face for an agonizing three heartbeats before giving an annoyed little huff and tilting his head towards the hallway.

At first Will thinks he's heading outside, and he wants to speak up, because there are *people* outside. There are people milling in the

parking lot. They could be overheard, they... But no, Mike turns away from the main doors and down another hallway, barely looking at Will. He's leading them to the AV Room. And sure enough, as they approach the door, Mike pulls his Presidential AV Club Key from his keychain and lets them in.

The door closes with a hiss and a *thump-click* that Will would know anywhere. He hovers near the door for a moment to lock it after them, paranoid and sick with nerves, and Mike lifts his eyebrows. He's still wearing the stage makeup that Will put on him. It's a little blurred now, smudging slightly with wear and with sweat, which - unfairly - makes it look even better on him.

"Okay," Mike draws. "We're somewhere quiet. Now what's so unfit for mortal ears that we had to lock the door like we're doing a drug deal?"

Will stutters for an embarrassing length of time. He had a speech all planned out, he's been rehearsing it in his head for days, and now it's gone. Poof. No more words, only panic. Mike's eyebrows start to creep even higher as seconds tick by, and Will forces out the only part of the speech he can remember.

"Look, I - I'm not upset that you're... with him. I mean with a guy. I just -"

If Mike would just *talk* this would be so much easier, if he would give Will *anything*, any kind of reaction except for that stony, skeptical glare.

There was going to be so much more to this. So many more explanations, strung together in a way that made sense, like an essay. Maybe not eloquent, but understandable. Something that would do justice to this conversation, to what Will is about to tell him. But he's lost all of them, every well-thought-out phrase and sentence, and he needs to get it out before Mike loses patience and leaves again.

So he skips to the end. He bares his soul and risks all and says, "I just wished you'd picked me. Instead."

He couldn't look at Mike while he said that, so his eyes are on the

table in the moment of complete silence that follows. His vision narrows to his hands, to his fingernails picking anxiously at a flaw in the plastic, and his chest aches with how hard his heart is pounding.

He can hear Mike swallow, across the table - it's *that* quiet - and then, very quietly and in a voice rough as sandpaper, Mike says, "Shit."

Mike's mind is whirling. He can't have heard him right. That can't be what Will said. But, *fuck*, it makes *so much sense*. Everything is spinning in his head, realigning and rearranging, forming new patterns, new explanations. It's like this whole semester was half in shadow, and Mike didn't even realize it until somebody turned a spotlight on things he never even knew were there.

And Mike, caught between the very worst rock and hard place, eventually breathes, "Shit... Shit, Will, I..." He closes his eyes, overwhelmed, and when he opens them again Will is peering up at him with an expression of absolute misery. "You should've... Why didn't you say something?"

Why the fuck did Will never say anything? If he wanted... If that's what... Fuck. Fuck! Things could have been different, *so many* things could have been different. And now Mike is dizzy with the sheer quantity of reevaluation his brain is doing in a very small space of time. Not just their fight, not just this semester, but the past several *years*. Everything he's been assuming since he was fourteen goddamn years old, as he struggled to repress and then come to terms with his sexuality, all the times he thought to himself, *Will gets enough shit for seeming gay, the last thing I want to do is make that worse...*

And then he gets stuck on one thought, over and over, just, *oh my god, he was jealous, he wasn't repulsed by me after all, he wasn't trying to attack who I was after all, fuck I should have known, I should have known Will wouldn't do that -*

Will still hasn't responded, and Mike is so stunned that he can't tell if it's been one second or ten, so he repeats, "Why didn't you ever say something?"

"Why didn't *you*?" Will spits back, choked up, which is bad because

Mike can't see Will cry without crying himself -

"I didn't know!" He takes a desperate little step forward, unsteady on his feet as he rushes to get the words out, give *some* sort of explanation. "I didn't realize, I had no idea until last year. I liked you for so long, I didn't know that's what it was. I-it was just *there*, that's just how things were, I didn't realize it was - I just thought something was *wrong* with me and -"

He presses a wrist to his nose, stopping his rambling and his running nose in one motion, sniffing.

And into the quiet, Will rasps, "It's okay."

He steps around the table, hesitant, as if waiting for Mike to flinch or bolt when he reaches out. Mike does neither, and maybe he shouldn't let Will fold him into a trademark Will Hug, but he doesn't have the strength to say no. Not after that confession.

"It's okay," Will repeats, and Mike shakes his head hard without knowing what he's refusing - himself, maybe - and Will squeezes him tighter and insists, "It's okay. It's okay. I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry, Mike."

He's starting to jolt too, and Mike wants to rip himself away and say, *No. No, do not cry, because then I won't be able to stop, and it's just gonna be a stupid pathetic mess.*

But he doesn't. He can't. He's too relieved, too scared, *he doesn't hate me, he's not repulsed by me, he's not mad at me, oh, my god Will is queer, he's queer and he... likes me?*

Mike pulls back a little, trying to form a question, but Will has started babbling with wet eyes and a swollen throat. "I swear I didn't mean any of that, what I said, I just - I kept seeing you with *him* and it was - I was -" He lets go of Mike briefly, without moving back, to gesture near his face as if indicating burning cheeks. "I was just so *mad*, a-and *confused*, and I couldn't say anything about it because -"

"Mad at *me*?" Mike murmurs. He knows that's the last thing he should be focusing on, out of all of that, but his brain is still flooded

with fear and adrenaline and he's operating at a fraction of his usual intelligence.

Will sniffs and takes a couple of gulping breaths, seeming to steady himself. "No," he says, then drops his face. They're so close that he headbutts Mike's shoulder. "Yes. I don't - it's - hard to explain."

"Try," Mike urges. He needs this. He needs to know this.

Will sniffs again, and his shoulders shudder through a last hiccupping breath, but when he lifts his face he looks oddly calm. His breath has evened out, though he's still panting a little, and his eyes are wet and calm and so *close*.

"Okay," he whispers.

Mike knows what's coming. He knew the second that Will lifted his face, the second he looked at him like that. And he knows he should stop this, put his hands gently but firmly on Will's shoulders and push him back. But he's a terrible person, selfish and reckless and he's wanted this for *years*. So instead of pulling away from the kiss he pushes into it, and once their lips touch it's like the floodgates have been opened. He can't help it. It's Will.

It's strange, Mike thinks, kissing someone shorter than him again. He hasn't done that since El.

And then he stops thinking.

The softness of it surprises him. It starts out very sweet, not quite close-lipped but soft, achingly tender, simple - almost a child's kiss. They both smell like they've been running around backstage for several hours. Dust, sweat, and the distinctive *prop room* smell mingled with the smell of high school hallways. Mike re-aligns their heads and presses in again, more firmly this time, surer. Will's torso radiates heat where it's pressed to his, solid and alive and real, but his hands are cold and clammy where they skim tentatively down Mike's arms. Mike doesn't care.

He keeps thinking, *All right, that's enough, I should stop now*, and every time he delays just a moment more. He can't break away now, right

when Will is starting to figure out how to move, working his lips gently against Mike's, easing his arms around Mike's waist like he's afraid he's not allowed to.

Just a moment more. Just one. And then he'll step back.

Will didn't know how to explain everything in his mind. Everything that happened this semester. How could he? How could anyone put that into words?

But Mike wanted an answer, and this was the only way Will could think to give it to him. If he can't explain himself to Mike, maybe he can show him.

He only meant to go in for a peck. One quiet, simple moment, and that would be it. But Mike carefully adjusted them and started again instead of ending it, and Will thought, *Okay, one more.*

And now Will knows he should pull away but he doesn't want to, *he doesn't want to*, and Mike's hand comes up and braces the nape of his neck to *keep* him from pulling away, and it deepens. Not quite heated, but still something desperate about it. Gentle but nowhere near tentative. Reverent and fervent. Will can't stop himself from giving a low, satisfied, yearning groan in the back of his throat.

Finally, he thinks, vaguely, as Mike's thumb strokes down the shell of his ear, making him shiver. *Finally, finally.*

Will wants more, so much more. He wants this, just this, every day for the rest of his life, and he wants Mike to push him back against a wall and grind their hips together, and he wants to leave here holding hands and fall asleep on the couch curled together like puppies.

I liked you for so long, I just didn't know what it was.

I liked you.

I like you.

Mike likes him. Mike likes him *back*. It's every piteous prayer and

daydream Will has ever offered up to the universe, and it's the worst kind of nightmare. Because he knows he's going to have to wake up.

And sure enough, before the kiss can escalate from *fervent* to *heated*, Mike does pull away - gently, so very gently, even coming back in to place one last peck on Will's mouth when he tries to chase Mike's lips.

"I can't just..." he says, just as gently as that last little kiss. He takes a full breath in, then lets it out, ruffling Will's bangs with the force of it. "I can't. I have Emmett."

"I know," Will says back, because he was expecting that, he knew that was coming.

It doesn't make it hurt any less when he pulls himself away, ignoring Mike's soft protests, unlocks the door with fumbling fingers, and forces himself to keep walking despite Mike calling his name.

Notes for the Chapter:

Told you I wouldn't leave you with last chapter's angst for long! Now you get a different *kind* of angst! :D

As always, I LOVE hearing your thoughts! :)

7. Three's Company

Mike is chasing Will.

They've been racing around the circle of Will's house, living room to kitchen to dining room to living room, dodging furniture by a hair's breadth, climbing straight over the back of the couch and careening around corners in a way that makes Emmett highly anxious. Any moment they're going to break something, or crash into something, and how awkward would that be? He doesn't know this house. He doesn't know this family. It's going to be awful if Mrs. Byers comes home and finds the three of them standing around an upturned shelf or broken lamp, and introductions have to be made like *that*.

But, as he watches them and wonders if he should join in somehow, Emmett suspects that they know the angles and edges of this house as well as their own bodies. The way they *just* skim around the sewing table, the way their paths around the house are as smooth and practiced as an Olympian's routine. He suspects they've been doing this for a long time.

"Weren't there more apples in the fridge?" he calls out, hoping vaguely to halt the pursuit so he can stop flinching every time they pass a lamp.

"I want *that* one," Mike replies in a laugh, out of breath and red-faced as he takes a swipe at the prize.

Will, dodging and feinting on the opposite side of the dining room table, stares Mike down while taking an exaggerated bite. The crisp sound is followed immediately by Mike's betrayed scoff, and then the hunt is afoot again.

Chester, the Byers' ageing white dog with stiff joints, *whuffs* as he cavorts after them. He can't quite keep up, but he rears and prances, excited because his people are excited.

If this was happening in Mike's house, or his own, fine, Emmett could deal with it. But this is the Byers house, where he hasn't been before, and he's still very much on Awkward First Time Guest Mode, perched

on the couch, afraid to touch anything.

Mike and Will have no such qualms.

They weren't expecting to be invited over. But when Will asked at the end of the school day, they both shrugged and said, "Sure." It's something to do. Somewhere to be.

The fight for the apple culminates when Mike doubles back the opposite way and leaps out of the hallway to surprise Will, making him give a startled little shout as Mike locks his arms around Will's waist and lifts. Will thrashes and bucks, teeth bared, remarkably powerful for his small frame. Mike struggles to keep a hold on him, stumbling - and then, quite suddenly, they both go down. Emmett jolts to peer over the arm of the couch, praying he won't have to drive anyone to the hospital for a concussion - but they're fine. Chester got there first, trying to lick both their faces as they laugh and shoo him away.

Mike has Will pinned, one hand straining to contain Will's flailing left arm while the other chases after the ever-moving apple. Will jerks the fruit back and forth, above his head and close to his chest and then up into the air, evading Mike by a fraction of a second - and then he makes eye contact with Emmett.

"Catch!" he says, and Emmett fumbles as something strikes him in the chest: a gleaming red-yellow apple, warm from Will's death grip, with one bite out of it.

He manages to catch it, by some miracle, as Mike laughs, "No *fair!*"

Emmett chuckles along, debating taking a bite for himself just to tease, and he's about to hand it over when Mike's laughter dies abruptly. Will has gone kind of quiet too. Emmett takes one glance at their red cheeks - and the position they're in - and understands why. Without their pointless battle to distract them, it seems that both of them have simultaneously become aware that Mike is perched firmly just over Will's hips, pinning down one of his arms, and that Will has been shifting and tossing beneath him.

Mike is up in a flash, on his feet before Emmett registers the

movement, clearing his throat as he accepts the apple that Emmett holds out.

“Aw,” Will grumps, sitting up with an adorably genuine pout. His hair is messed up from being on the floor. “C’mon. You’re just gonna give it to him? After all that?”

“Get your own,” Mike tosses back, then bites in. His teeth dig in near the same place that Will’s did; apparently he has no issue putting his mouth where Will’s spit has been.

But when Mike comes back to flop on the couch, he lands on Emmett’s lap.

This isn’t the first time they’ve hung out, the three of them. They’ve done it a few times since Mike and Will made up. But Emmett is still getting used to it. To having an audience. To having someone else witness Mike crane his neck back to push a kiss against Emmett’s jaw.

He doesn’t know much about their reconciliation. Mike went from cursing Will’s name one day to pretending he didn’t exist the next, and then all at once Emmett showed up at the Wheeler house and there was Will, lounging around like he owned the place, just like always. And then one day Mike invited Will to come hang out with them, and Emmett was a tad bummed at first because that meant no kisses or *couple stuff* until afterwards.

Except apparently not. Not anymore.

It makes sense. Will knows about them, and apparently he’s cool with it now, so... why hide? Emmett is just glad the tension is gone. He hates when people fight. It makes the whole atmosphere so anxious and awful. All he can ever think of is his old house, when his dad still lived with them. Tiptoeing down the stairs as quickly as he dared, praying his dad would be too busy griping about work at the top of his lungs to notice Emmett grabbing his backpack from the entryway. His parents were always fighting about something. Except, his mom never fought back, not really, so the tension never went away. It just stayed, and stewed, and Emmett hated being in that house. Maybe that’s why he ended up at Danny’s so often.

Emmett pets the dog and pretends to watch the TV as Will slinks onto the couch next to them. He starts pawing at Mike's arm, making a play-sad face, eyes fixed on the apple. Mike holds it out with a grin and an eye roll and Will brightens theatrically. Slipping his palm over the back of Mike's hand to hold the fruit steady while he helps himself to another bite.

Emmett is starting to understand why the Party - Max in particular - calls them "lovebirds" sometimes. If this is how they normally act - if they're finally thawing to Emmett enough to be themselves around him, and *this* is their normal - it's no wonder the Party raises eyebrows sometimes.

But, he reminds himself with a little smirk as they draw him into conversation, Will isn't the one getting into bed with Mike.

Sure, Mike and Will play around a lot. They share food and drink. They lean against each other when they're standing side-by-side. They communicate with glances and minute facial expressions. And Mike is pretty obviously attracted to Will - and who wouldn't be, with those long, graceful hands, muddy green eyes, and gentle demeanor with an undercurrent of watchfulness? He's an intriguing guy. Not Emmett's type, but he gets why Mike stares sometimes.

But Will isn't the one that gets to climb through Mike's window tonight, the ascent up the side of the house practiced and smooth, so as not to wake his parents. Will isn't the one that gets to see Mike look up from his writing at his desk, face lighting up as he carefully slides open the window and whispers, *hey, you*. Will isn't the one that gets to strip down to underwear, stripping the past day and week and year along with his clothes, and climb into the heavenly warm softness of his boyfriend's bed. He doesn't get to feel Mike bury his face in his neck as he breathes out sharp, damp, quiet breaths, Mike's fingernails digging into his shoulders as he hangs on. Will doesn't get that. He can have Mike's fond glances, his last fries, his history and childhood. Those are Will's. But those stolen hours when no one else is around? Mike's little gasps and groans? Those are Emmett's alone.

All three of them are seated on the couch now. The TV is on and they have homework sitting on the Byers' coffee table, but they're mainly

just talking. At least, they are now. For a few minutes, Mike was chasing Will around the house, both of them regressing to habits from a much younger age as they ducked and dodged.

And then, of course, a much less childlike moment. Will had thrown the prized apple to Emmett, and all at once Mike found himself without a fight, without an objective - and straddling Will's hips.

The worst part was, he's been in positions like that with Emmett before. Using the strength of his legs to work himself up and down, rolling his hips. And his grip on Will's arm meant he was hunched over, looming over Will, close enough to see Will's eyes flash up to his. In the split second before he pushed to his feet, Mike saw the tip of Will's tongue dart out to wet his lips. And he knew they were thinking about the same thing.

And then he was standing, sauntering casually to the couch to claim his winnings, flopping down on top of Emmett. Turning to press a kiss to his boyfriend's jaw.

He's gotta be careful about that. He can't be slipping up like that, not anymore. Once was already too much.

Mike's mind churns away, even as he goes on autopilot to chatter and laugh with his two companions. Guilt has been eating away at him ever since *that* night, the night of the play, but what can he do? He can't undo what happened. He can only dial up the love by a few notches, snuggling and headbutting his boyfriend whenever possible, trying to set right one big wrong by the cumulation of little affections.

He doesn't know if he should bring it up or not. He doesn't know how to. The more time passes, the harder it is. How does one just casually say, *Hey, babe, funny story, I kissed my best friend. Technically he started it. But nothing else happened, I swear. Are you mad?* Yeah, no. Not gonna happen. And it's not like he's dating Will behind Emmett's back, so... as long as nothing else happens, it's probably okay, right? Surely a one-time slip-up can be forgiven. Once is a fluke. Once is nothing.

The problem is, this isn't helping. This, the three of them. Hanging

out. Together. Because on the one hand, it's... surprisingly freeing. He feels like he can let out a breath he'd been holding for a long time. He can be openly queer in front of someone other than his boyfriend, kiss Emmett with somebody watching, and... it's okay. The world doesn't end. Demons don't emerge from the walls, pointing fingers and wailing. Will doesn't scoff or curl his lip or turn pointedly away. He just watches, his eyes masked in that expert way of his. If there was any doubt left in Mike's mind that Will isn't disgusted by him and his deviance, that Will doesn't hate him, it's gone now. Mike can breathe. It's okay. He's okay.

It's new. This feeling of acceptance. This little taste of freedom, hidden away in the Byers house where it's just him and two people who know what he is and don't care - who like him for it, even.

And on the other hand, it makes everything so much harder. The side effect of being like this in front of Will, not hiding anymore, is that hope is rearing its head again. That stupid hope he held out for so many years, the one he *thought* he extinguished on Thanksgiving. And now it's back again. That childhood crush that just won't go away, that devotion that's been a part of his life since kindergarten, that stubborn little whisper that says, *I'm yours, you're mine*.

The problem is, ever since Will kissed him, that whisper has grown ever more stubborn, more persistent, and now it's a shout.

A shout that Mike ignores. Because he has Emmett.

Emmett, sunny and easygoing next to Will's more reserved and moody disposition. Emmett, who hates scary movies where Will loves them, who stands an inch over Mike while Will had to tilt his head back just slightly to reach Mike's lips. Emmett, who Mike barely knows. Even after all this time, he sometimes looks at his boyfriend and has the uncomfortable, distant gnawing sensation that he's looking at a stranger. He barely knows anything about Emmett's past, or what's going on in his brain.

But Mike knows Will like the back of his hand. He can *talk* to Will. About anything. About The Deep Stuff. They've always been able to do that. Mike can't think of a single time he was able to broach deep waters with Emmett. They've been on the beach this whole time,

wading in the shallows, and Emmett has been drawing back every time Mike tries to coax them to swim.

But Will.

Mike knows Will. He *knows* him, as a person. He'd know him from a mile away, from his gait alone. He knows Will's hopes and fears and he knows *why* he has them. If someone dropped him into a pool of Will's brainwaves, Mike would recognize him.

He doesn't mean to compare them. It's not right, somehow. He squirms inside of himself when he does it. But the contrast is made all the more obvious when it's just the three of them, without the rest of the Party to distract him.

They talk. They copy each other's math homework. They groan about upcoming finals. They make fun of commercials. Mike has his best friend back, and he has his boyfriend, and it's fine.

It's fine.

This can be fine. This can work.

It has to.

Weeks pass, and Will is so caught up in the end-of-semester whirlwind that he almost doesn't have time to be sad.

Almost.

It still hurts, being around the two of them. But he has five big tests to study for, and three big projects, two of which include a presentation, and Will hates school presentations. He'd rather just do his work and turn it in, good or bad, than stand there in front of twenty dead-eyed classmates trying to stutter his way through *Agriculture in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Plus there's Christmas, coming up faster than he can comprehend. He decorates the house with his family. They get a tree. He has to do some sleuthing to find out what his mom and Jonathan want, and then see if he has enough money to get it for them. Just like every year, Mike offers to help pay, and just like every year Will tries to turn him down. He finds \$15 in his coat

pocket that afternoon anyway.

So while he still feels a little sick whenever Emmett absently reaches for Mike's hand, at least he has plenty of other things on the brain that he can turn to.

And it's kind of affirming, too, in an odd and powerful way. Hanging out with them. He's with his people, spending time with people *like him* for the first time in his life. Not that he's exactly *out* to Emmett, but... he *could* be. That's the important thing. He doesn't *have* to hide himself away behind masks and curtains here. He could remark on the cuteness of an actor on TV if he wanted to. He could mention a crush or get caught checking out some guy on the sidewalk, and it would be fine. There's a sort of safety here, with his peers. People like him, who have the same unusual and twisted thoughts and desires as him, who are deviants in the same way he is. On some fundamental level, these are people he can trust.

Especially when it's just them. When no one else is around and it's just the three of them, three queers just existing near each other. No charade necessary. Emmett's tones grow more expressive, during those times. Mike gestures with his hands and fingers more, movements looser, letting go of some ever-present inner tension that usually holds him to some unwritten rule of firm, unyielding stoicism. Conversation turns to queerness itself, sometimes. They'll debate the merits of Luke Skywalker and Han Solo getting together - *"C'mon, Luke was totally jealous when Han was talking about Leia! I mean, they practically spelled it out on-screen. He's gay, I'm telling you."* - and Will's heart chatters along behind his ribs, pumping an acute mish-mash of adrenaline and dopamine through his system. Emmett mentions Stonewall and Mike climbs right up onto his soapbox, getting all fired up, pacing around and raising his voice and Will and Emmett exchange a glance of amusement that means, *there he goes*. They talk about queer artists. Elton John. Freddie Mercury. David Bowie. They argue over who's best. Mike staunchly supports Elton, Emmett is for Freddie, and Will claims David Bowie just so they have an even argument - although really he could have gone for Freddie too.

And Will basks in it, trying to soak up as much of the atmosphere as he possibly can, drinking it in through his pores. There's something

healing about it.

He keeps thinking of doing it. He keeps ramping up to it, rehearsing the words in his head, trying to find just the right combination of syllables and inflections. Something he could toss out, casually, like it's no big deal.

Well, he's hot though, so...

Well if I had a boyfriend...

I'm just saying, if River Phoenix knocked on the door and asked me to elope with him, I'd just be like, let me pack my bags.

He's pretty cute.

Dude, I'd totally date Peter Parker.

But he never does. It's too frightening, the survival instinct to shut his mouth too deeply ingrained in his psyche.

He will. Someday. And for now, as much as it stings to see Mike curled up to *Emmett's* side, giving his kisses and sweet words to *Emmett* - and it does sting, it stings deep in his chest every single time - Will is enjoying the company.

Plus, it's more fascinating to him than he'd care to admit. Seeing the two of them. Seeing them be all couple-y together, without hiding it away. Even as the weeks pass, the novelty doesn't wear off. Will keeps finding himself watching them out of the corner of his eye, thinking, *So this is what it looks like when two guys are openly together.*

And he really should stop doing that, because every time it just makes him ache. But it makes him happy, too. Like maybe he's not as alone as he's always felt.

It's Christmas break, the day before Christmas Eve in fact, when Emmett confronts him.

They're at Will's house, and although Mike just left - Karen called and summoned him home for family holiday activities - Emmett is still in

the process of making his escape. His house is on the edges of town just like Will's, only about half a mile west, so he's hoofing it back.

Only Emmett isn't leaving. He's done tying his shoes, and his coat is on, but he's been hovering in the kitchen doorway like he wants to say something.

Will glances up from the glass of eggnog he had been pouring himself. Maybe Emmett just wants a send-off.

"See you later man," he says, trying and failing not to sound a little tired and sullen.

Another handful of seconds pass before Emmett suddenly takes a breath and says, "Did I, like, do something to you?"

Will blinks. Surprised and confused. He struggles not to frown. "What?"

It's been a bad week for Will. He was stressed out of his mind from finals last week and now he's stressed about Christmas, trying to find or make presents for everyone, trying to console his mother after Lonnie calls to spread holiday cheer. So he's been grumpy. Not to mention there's a special kind of hell in spending the holiday season trying not to be jealous. Every saccharine Christmas movie on TV makes Will groan. *'Tis the season to be jolly?* Fuck off. *'Tis the season to survive and shiver through the icy nights, alone, battling insomnia headaches and bitterness.* *'Tis the season to mind your own damn business, Santa.* Just mark him on the naughty list, hand over the coal and be done with it.

There's a commercial that keeps running, featuring a happy couple getting engaged on a snowy sidewalk after years of sharing sticks of Extra gum.

Will decides he hates Extra gum.

Although, Will's mood can't be entirely chalked up to jealousy or holiday stress. There's also a fair amount of guilt in there. A whetstone to the knife of his other troubles. Sure, he's a little miffed at the whole situation, at Emmett, at Mike. But he's also mad at

himself for kissing someone else's boyfriend.

And Emmett, apparently, picked up on that anger. Except he seems to have taken it personally - which may be fair, considering how frosty Will was to him for the past months.

The blonde in question shoves his hands in his pockets, avoiding eye contact. "I just, I thought we were cool. I thought you two made up."

"Mike and I?" Will takes the eggnog carton to the fridge, just to give his hands something to do. "We did. What are we talking about here?"

For a moment the only sound is the fridge closing, and the steady white noise of old snow crystals being blown against the sides of the house.

Then Emmett speaks. "Look, you're obviously pissed at me -"

Will looks away with a sigh, pacing a few steps to dispel a sudden spike of uncomfortably energy, and Emmett pushes through -

"- and it's kind of bullshit, because I don't know what I did, so -"

"You didn't -" Will scrubs his hands over his face. "You didn't do anything. It's just a bad month for me."

A pause.

Neither of them are the overly confrontational type. Neither of them are comfortable. This conversation has been stilted, awkward. But apparently Emmett started this with some sort of mission in mind, because he pushes.

"Yeah, clearly."

This time Will does glare. Really? They're gonna be sarcastic and petty now? Come on. He does not need this right now.

At last he settles on muttering, "Look, can we not do this today?"

"This? What's *this*? "

Will flicks a hand in the air, indicating the whole kitchen, the whole scene. "This - this - this - *conversation*. "

"So there is a conversation. There is something."

"Fuck's sake, that's not what -"

"Look I'm just trying to be a good friend. Okay?" That shuts Will up, and Emmett takes the opportunity to go on. "We're friends. You're my friend. I'm trying to -" He makes a frustrated back-and-forth motion with his hands, like he's indicating an exchange, or a connection.

The guilty knot in Will's stomach redoubles.

Emmett thinks of them as friends.

He saw Will was upset, thought it was because of him, and tried to make amends.

Fuck.

Emmett must take his shamefaced silence for refusal, because after a moment he steps towards the door and starts to mutter, "Yeah. Okay. Not today, I -"

"I kissed your boyfriend."

Emmett stops, looks over his shoulder. "What?"

"Mike."

"Yeah, I - I know who my boyfriend is."

He's facing Will again, hovering in the doorway like he's not sure what to do with himself, and for a moment they just look at each other. Will starts to get antsy, thinking maybe Emmett didn't understand the first time, and he tries again.

"I kissed him." He swallows. "I'm sorry."

Another beat. Will's pulse throbs through him and he's sweating a

cold, anxious sweat under his winter sweater.

“Oh.” Emmett stares at him, dumbly. “Uh, shit. Okay.”

He seems remarkably unsurprised, and Will blurts, “Did Mike tell you?”

Emmett is looking off towards the window. He looks a little troubled. Not heartbroken. Not mad. Not shocked. Just troubled. “No.”

It’s Will’s turn to say, “Oh.” And then because he feels like he owes some sort of explanation, he starts rambling. “It just - it was just the one time. It was after the play, the first play. The first showing. And he was still mad at me because of the fight, ‘cause he thought I was mad at *him*, and I was just trying to explain. I shouldn’t have done it.”

The silence goes on forever this time, punctuated only by the hiss of ice against the side of the house. Chester lopes slowly into the kitchen, senses the atmosphere, and slinks under the table to give them both sad eyes. Will wants to scream. He hates not knowing if Emmett is about to yell or cry or curse him out or what. He hates the limbo.

When Emmett finally speaks up, it’s a quiet, gruff tone that Will doesn’t think he’s heard before. “I really could have gone without knowing that.”

He moves as he speaks, and before Will quite realizes what’s happening, he’s gone. A moment later the front door opens and shuts and Emmett passes the front window, marching off towards home.

Will stands there, staring after him. And then, not knowing what else to do, he sits stiffly at the breakfast table and sips his eggnog.

That went... better and worse than he ever expected.

It’s starting to get late, and Joyce yawns and tussles Will and Jonathan’s hair before wandering off towards her room. Jonathan lasts about another hour before going to brush his teeth himself.

Will remains curled up on the couch. The downside to getting a good night's sleep last night is that now his body thinks it's time to stay up for the next twenty four hours. But that's fine. He's not mad about that today - not on Christmas. He's content to sit here on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, sucking on a candy cane, watching all the holiday themed TV and debating whether it's worth the risk of being caught to sneak into the cupboard above the fridge and make himself a hot toddy.

They had a nice Christmas. Will was shocked to find that he slept in until 9:30 - a huge victory for him and his seasonal insomnia - and sat up in bed to find his stocking, full and heavy, leaning against his feet. He picked it up with a grin, pulling on his robe and carrying it with him to the kitchen where his family was chowing down on Joyce's traditional Christmas morning cinnamon buns.

"No one lightly burns food quite like Mom," Jonathan half-whispered when she was in the bathroom, and Will nearly spat his coffee everywhere.

They opened presents under the tree, steadily snacking on the various candies they had gotten in their stockings. Will got a new video game, nice colored pencils, and a hand-sewn pair of mittens from his mom, which he'll wear to make her happy though they won't be earning him any fashion points. Jonathan got him a couple patches for his jacket, a late '70s British punk cassette, and a secondhand book with a nice heavy hardcover, the dust jacket boasting a towering green dragon. His dad sent him a Casio watch and a gift card.

He doesn't know what Mike got him yet. They're gonna meet up tomorrow to exchange gifts and share what they already have, trading chocolate coins for maple sugar candies and taking turns on new games and new comics. Their traditional December the 26th Meetup.

Which is why, when the phone rings and Will goes to grab it, he's not surprised to hear his best friend's voice. "Hey, Will?"

"Hey. Yeah, it's me." Will can tell there's a smile in his voice as he clicks off the TV and says, "Hold on, let me switch phones."

He sets the receiver down on the end table and pads to his room to pick up the set by his bed - a Christmas present from last year, actually, installed after a particularly brutal winter of night terrors and flashbacks. He spent so much time sitting on the floor in the hallway at night, talking to El or Mike or sometimes Max or Dustin - and, very occasionally, Lucas - that his mom finally got him his own phone. This way, she said, he could at least sit in his bed instead of on the floor, and he wouldn't wake up his family by talking for hours in the hallway outside their doors, no matter how quiet he tried to be.

He doubles back to hang up the first receiver, then settles onto his bed, legs crossed, blanket draped around his shoulders. He's a little surprised that Mike is still up - although, based on the *blips* and *bloops* in the background of Mike's breathing, he can guess the reason.

"New game?" he says, and Mike chuckles.

"How'd you know?"

"What is it?"

"*The Legend of Zelda*," Mike reports proudly. "You have to come play it, it's excellent. It's got dungeons and monsters and different landscapes and weapons and stuff. Did you get any?"

"*Castlevania*."

"What's that?"

"I guess it's about fighting vampires? I dunno, looked cool. It's for NES, though, I'll have to come over there to play it."

"Only if I get a turn," Mike teases, as if that was ever in question. "Oh, no, no - shit. Now I have to get through those stupid traps again."

Will smiles. He can imagine Mike, illuminated only by the glow of the shitty little TV the Wheelers keep in the basement, huddled on the old couch. He's probably wearing his new yearly Grandma Wheeler sweater, munching on those expensive little fancy chocolates his family gets each year. The basement phone stretched to the couch

so he can hold it with his shoulder.

“Merry Christmas, by the way,” Will says, and he’s rewarded by the nearly imperceptible sound of a smile - tiny *click* of lips parting over teeth, little inhale.

“Merry Christmas, Will.”

They talk while Mike plays. Eventually, the sounds of the game cease, and there’s a moment of white noise as Mike settles himself down on the couch.

“Should I let you sleep?” Will asks, and Mike says, “Nah.”

So they keep talking.

And maybe Will is a little tired, after all, because as the minutes tick by, a stupid impulse keeps poking at his brain. It’s because of what happened on the twenty-third. That conversation with Emmett. He keeps thinking, *This seems to be the week of truths. I may as well.*

But he doesn’t follow the impulse until Mike brings up Emmett. Apparently they met up yesterday to exchange gifts, and Mike is bragging about some poster Emmett got him when Will spits it out without warning.

“So, um, I kind of saw you guys.”

Mike stops, like he’s trying to process the words Will spoke right over his own sentence. “Saw us?”

“Outside the cabin.”

He’s lost, and Will can hear it in the little pause before he echoes, “The cabin?”

“You know. The party. In October. We watched *Alien*.”

“You saw us outs- ” Mike starts to repeat, and then stops dead. Now he understands. Will hears him swallow before he says, “Oh.”

Will squirms, face hot even though Mike can’t see him. It’s been

eating at him since October, the little squeeze of acid guilt in his stomach for having intruded on something that wasn't his to witness. And since this is apparently a week of confessions... Maybe a little Christmas magic will help make this conversation bearable instead of mortifying or explosive.

"Yeah," he says, because he has to say *something*. "I didn't mean to. I just came looking for you when you guys disappeared and..."

There's a worrying silence on the other end of the line. And then, in a tone that could be lightly teasing if not for that little purr underneath, Mike says, "I mean... Did you like what you saw?"

October.

That party at the cabin was in October.

Will has known about them since *October*.

Mike lies on the couch, staring up at the basement ceiling full of beams and wires, and thinks, *That long? He's known that long?*

Shit. No wonder Will finally blew up the way he did on Thanksgiving Break. Mike thought maybe he only just found out about them. He thought Will had figured them out that very day, or perhaps as much as a week before. Not *months* ago.

He's been quiet too long. Will's breathing has grown just the slightest bit shaky. If Mike didn't know him so well he wouldn't even be able to detect the change.

"I mean," he says, only now registering what that admission *means*.

Will knew about them, far longer than he thought - but he also *saw* them. He left the cabin to look for them, probably concerned, and he found - what exactly? Were they kissing? Was Mike's shirt off yet? Or - the skin of Mike's scalp prickles - was it the blowjob itself?

He wants to press his burning face into the back of the couch. *Oh, Jesus*. What a way to find out.

He means to tease, gently because Will is still a little sensitive about the topic even with him. But his voice is rougher than he intended when he says, "Did you like what you saw?"

Will snorts out one breath, sucks in another one, and then hesitates before rasping, "I got off to it the next day, actually."

A jolt goes through Mike's body like an electric shock. Well, *shit*. That's... hot. That's really hot. And hotter still that Will *said* it, admitted it to him like that.

He wants to press for more details. He wants to know exactly what it was that Will jerked off to, exactly what it was that he saw. But he's aware that it would cross a sort of boundary to continue this conversation. The right thing to do would be to make some sort of joke to ease out of the situation, and move on to another topic. Before he starts imagining his best friend lying in bed at night, gripping himself while he thought of Mike kneeling in front of Emmett.

But then, as he's trying to formulate an appropriate segue, Will speaks again.

"What's it like to kiss him?" he says, his voice just as rough as before. There's a note of bitterness to it - but Mike thinks he hears real curiosity, too.

He readjusts the phone, tracing the ceiling with his eyes. There's a boundary here, somewhere, that he knows he's not supposed to cross. But where is it? How far can he go before he toes it?

Would he toe it anyway if Will asked him to?

He shivers. This is a dangerous game, and they both know it.

And, he decides, he doesn't care.

Mike starts talking. Shyly, haltingly. Using those storytellers' details he's collected, because if he can pretend this is fiction, if he can pretend he's just describing a scene to Will, it's easier to make the words flow. He tells Will about teeth and tongues and the warm metal of Emmett's lip ring. What Emmett feels like. The smell of him.

And Will listens to it, all of it, barely speaking a word except to acknowledge and encourage. And then Will pushes. He asks what it's like to *be* with a guy. He asks what they do.

And Mike hesitates. No one else knows about this. About them. Just Will. And Mike has been so *paranoid* about anyone finding out, about his parents finding out, about this coming back to bite him in the ass. Revealing this stuff aloud is terrifying. It shouldn't be, at least not to Will. He's seen them kiss plenty. It's just... that's different, somehow.

But there's also something stirring in Mike's chest. Something fluttering and almost painful, something as familiar as childhood crayons and board games and the Byers' backyard, something to do with Will. And when Will says, "*Please*, Mike," his voice unsteady and raw, that thing swells with a shudder and Mike starts talking.

He tells Will everything he asks. Will asks how they make out and Mike tells him about shoulders pressed against a wall, the dark denim of jeans rubbing together, hushed breaths, bruises sucked into skin. And then Will asks, breathlessly, quietly, how Mike's boyfriend touches him. And Mike closes his eyes and breathes for a few seconds and then describes zippers pushed down and biting knuckles to keep quiet and heat and skin. He talks about how the guilt doesn't hit until after, how it should feel wrong but it doesn't.

And then Will goes quiet, the way he does when he can't make the words come out of his mouth, but Mike hears his labored breathing. Mike is breathing a bit heavily himself. He's a little ashamed to give in and palm himself through the front of his pajama pants. Just not ashamed enough to stop.

"Do you..." Mike pants, "Do you want to know how...?"

There's the sound of motion, as if Will nodded, and a moment later he whispers, "Yeah."

"Do you... Do you want to know how...?" Mike ventures, and Will gives a fervent little nod, forgetting Mike can't see him.

This is wrong, all of it, and he loves it. This is the first time - that he

knows of - that he's talked to Mike while Mike was turned on. It's the first time he's heard the way Mike's voice gets a little lower, stumbling on his words a little more than normal. The way Mike's breath is getting just a little shallower, a little quicker. He can't find it in him to stop this, and after all, why should they? They're just talking. Even if one of Will's hands is holding the phone and the other is... otherwise employed.

"Yeah," he whispers. *Please. Oh, please just keep talking, Mike.*

And Mike does. He tells Will about "tropical" flavored lube with a weird aftertaste - apparently it was on clearance, and Will laughs at that. But then Mike tells him about clothes coming off, hitting the floor, bare skin and pounding hearts, and Will groans. And Mike tells him about lube-slick fingers and heat and vulnerability - about one finger, then two and three. About gentleness and then fervor, stretching, pumping.

He tells Will about *tight* and *hot* and *rhythm* and Will, alone in his room with the phone pressed to his ear so hard it hurts, trembles as he strokes himself. And maybe he's imagining things, hearing what he wants to hear, but he swears he can hear an echo of his own movements from Mike's end of the line.

It is, at once, so much better and so much worse than doing this alone. Better because the sound of a muffled groan from the other end of the line makes Will shudder and jolt. Worse because afterwards, after they've wound down and hung up with a somewhat awkward, *see you tomorrow, good night*, he's alone again.

Mike holds the phone against his chest long after Will has hung up. If Will had stayed on the line he might have heard Mike's heartbeat, hard and fast at first and then calming as he takes deep breaths and his pulse slows.

He feels like he should be guilty. He should be guilty. Shouldn't he? Because it feels so close to cheating - so close, but not quite.

Right?

It's not like they actually did anything... It's not like Mike *told* Will to touch himself, or said, *Come for me, baby, I want to hear it*. It's not like either of them acknowledged that they were both obviously doing the same thing. He was just helping out a friend. Will is queer and less experienced than Mike, and Mike was just passing along some information. Just giving some tips, letting him know what to expect. They were just having a conversation, and they just happened to... both be jerking off...

... to the same thing...

... at the same time.

That's all.

Finally, Mike tucks himself back into his pajama pants, stands, and slots the phone back into its cradle. He's still a thousand miles away as he washes up in the little bathroom.

He wishes he *had* said something. That's the worst part. He wishes they had breached that unspoken barrier and acknowledged it, talked each other through it, came *with* each other instead of just concurrently.

He thinks about Will's voice, how it rasped as he spoke through heavy breaths, how Mike could hear those breaths growing faster and faster as Will listened to Mike's words. And he wishes, suddenly and acutely, that he had been there. He wishes they had this conversation in person. He doubts they ever would have; the degree of separation, imposed by the phone, allows words that never would have been revealed face-to-face. But he can wish. He can imagine that they were in the same bed, not a bed and a couch miles apart, and that he could have *seen* Will pleasuring himself to Mike's words, not just heard it.

Mike could have held him, maybe. He knows there's no touching allowed, not like *that*, not as friends, but he could have... Maybe he would have been allowed to pull Will onto his lap, bury his face in his shoulder as he talked and grind his hips against Will's ass. Does Will like that kind of thing? Would it have helped? Would he push back, rocking on Mike's lap as he started to tremble? Mike could have held him tight, whispered encouragements to him, rolled his hips up

against him as he jerked and shuddered through the end. He could have pushed the sweaty hair out of Will's face and kissed him as he came down, panting.

But they didn't do any of that. So it's okay.

The little worm of shame in his belly redoubles as Mike realizes: he wasn't picturing Emmett, describing all of those things to Will. The image in his mind was of his best friend.

Mike lies awake in his bed for a long time that night.

He shouldn't have done that. Emmett is his boyfriend, and he, he... does he love him? Maybe. It's hard to categorize that word, hard to know when to use it. After what happened to El, Mike knows better than to use the word *love* too soon or commit too deeply. He remembers all too well what blind puppy-love and badly-planned commitment did when he was thirteen. It got him and one of his best friends in the world into a vaguely unhealthy relationship that they floundered in for years. Too young and inexperienced to put a finger on exactly what was wrong, just making themselves miserable until they finally got out of it.

But it's different with Emmett. Isn't it? For one thing, he and El had been too young to do half the things he and Emmett do. And, he admits, the sex isn't exactly a drawback.

Mike never really felt attractive before. He still doesn't, most of the time. But even after months of being in a relationship, his first *physical* relationship, it's still novel and exhilarating for someone to *want* him. He was always kind of an ugly kid, and he never really grew out of it. He has acne, even on his upper back sometimes. His hair is weird, and he's not tanned by a long shot. And he's always had kind of a funny shaped face - *Frog Face* wasn't an arbitrary jeer. But Emmett looks at his gangly limbs and freckles and oddly proportioned face and pulls him *closer*, sighs and mouths against his pale and blemished skin, whispers that he's amazing and that he *looks* amazing. He looks at Mike like Mike is easy on the eyes instead of grating, and sometimes Mike even feels like it's true.

And not only that, but Emmett *wants* to be around Mike, he *wants* to

hold him and kiss him and see him, *all* of him, and fritter away time together. For so long, Mike thought of himself as distasteful on some level. Maybe everyone feels that way. Maybe humans are just soft and squishy and oily and awkward in all the wrong ways, and everyone is shocked and relieved when they find the first person who wants them anyway. But it didn't make the experience any less potent.

Emmett is the first person who ever really *wanted* Mike.

Except, now... he's not the only one, anymore. Because just now, panting softly over the phone, Will sounded a helluva lot like *he* wanted Mike, too.

Notes for the Chapter:

The end is near, folks.

As always, I love to hear any and all of your thoughts! :D

8. Sleeping with a Friend

“You’re running off on me already?”

Will freezes, halfway through closing the prop room door behind him. Theo had gone to get some food, and Will figured that meant they were done for the day, but now here he is again with a cafeteria tray balanced on one hand. Will doesn’t know *how* he managed to smuggle that out. Hawkins High teachers are infamous for their fierce restriction of where food can and cannot be eaten during lunch hour.

“I gotta meet up with my group.” Will closes the door and shrugs his backpack the rest of the way on, quietly but firmly indicating an imminent departure. “We were gonna work on a project.”

Theo tosses off a devil-may-care shrug. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Dunno.”

He adjusts his backpack, his clothes. Runs a hand through his hair. Dusts off his jeans. Trying to make it look like he wasn’t just making out with someone in a cramped closet.

Theo takes the evasion with a congenial nonchalance that may or may not be genuine, saluting Will with a grin. “See you ‘round, then,” he says, twirls his tray, and wanders off whistling.

Will doesn’t feel too bad. Theo isn’t exactly starved for options. Plus, he said himself he’s not the relationship type of guy, which suits Will fine. He’s not after a boyfriend - not now, when everything is still so fucked up. Just a nice brain-melting kiss every now and again. A little fooling around at lunch or after school. A hot, soft mouth buried against his own, a hand in his back pocket. Fingers brushing his jaw, pushing into his hair. Another human being close to him, kissing him. It’s comforting, and he likes kissing. Sue him.

Shoulders pressed against a wall, the echo of Mike’s voice whispers in the back of his mind. *Jeans rubbing together. Hushed breaths.*

But Will can’t make himself go further. He keeps *meaning* to. Theo

keeps hinting, softly pushing for more - a hand creeping under the hem of Will's shirt or down his stomach towards his belt - but he can't. He's not ready for that. He eases back every time, and lately, they've been meeting up less often.

It makes Will a little mad. At himself, mostly. There's the ghost of anger towards Emmett and Mike, too, but the potency has faded a degree or two in the two weeks since school started again. He's getting used to it. And he has his makeout buddy to distract him on the real rough days.

Except, he might not even have *that* anymore if he doesn't get himself together. He's been pulling back, and Theo has, understandably and chivalrously, backed off in kind. Or maybe he's just been hoping for something a little hotter and heavier, and he's getting bored of Will now that Will is hesitant to take that step.

Will frowns as he makes his way to the library. He really does have a group project to work on, but he's not heading to meet the group. They're not due to meet until class later today. He just needed some solitude.

Come on, he gripes at himself as he finds an empty table and plunks down with a sigh. *Are you seriously waiting for Mike? Is that what this is about? He clearly isn't waiting for you.*

He pulls a ziplocked and only slightly squashed sandwich from his backpack, glancing around for hawkeyed librarians, and takes a bite as he pulls out his work. But he can't concentrate. He stares right through the paper, fingers tapping against the faux-wood surface of the table.

I thought you were getting over him, not sulking over him.

"No food," Mrs. Dougherty says from directly behind him, her clipped tones loud and accusatory.

Will jumps about a foot and stuffs the sandwich back into his backpack, as if he could hide it after that, and mutters, "Sorry."

She moves away, but he can feel her eyes burning a hole in the back

of his head.

He sighs again and grips his pencil harder. Great. Now he'll be starving for the rest of the day. Just exactly what he needed.

Nausicaä leaps onto Emmett's lap from the other side of the couch, beeping at him and purring, pushing her mottled little head against his chin.

"Hey, pretty girl," he coos, happy to deliver the demanded pets and attention. "Did you come to rescue me?"

She always knows when he's sad. Sometimes she'll do this. Sometimes she brings him "presents," dead and otherwise, to try to cheer him up. He's glad she decided on the headbutting routine today.

He scratches his cat's head, murmuring nonsense in response to her meows, and returns to staring out the window.

For a while, he tried to forget it. Really, he did. And he was doing pretty well for a while. Christmas came and went, and then New Years, and then they were back in school and he had new classes and new classrooms to figure out, a new schedule to memorize.

But lately it's been worming its way back into his brain.

Which is really damn annoying. Because now he's conflicted. Now he knows about the kiss. He knows that Will wants Mike in some way - and Emmett likes to think he knows Mike fairly well. He can say with some certainty that if Mike hadn't wanted that kiss, it wouldn't have happened. Mike is stubborn. He's not afraid to make a scene. He would have pulled away.

But Mike *did* want the kiss. Emmett knows that. Something in him has suspected nearly since the start. He's seen the way the two of them exist together. Two halves of a whole. And now that Will *told* him - damn it, why did Will have to tell him? - the pieces are falling together. The little touches and smiles. Mike's mouth on the lip of Will's thermos, Will's flushed cheeks in the moment before Mike got

off his hips.

How unlucky. How *inconvenient* that Will chose to tell him.

Ignorance is bliss. And now that Emmett knows, Will has robbed him of the privilege of inertia. He can't just continue along the same track anymore, blithely forging ahead, eyes on the prize. Only a year and a few months left of high school. Just carve out a routine and let the current carry you there.

Only, not anymore. Because that kiss? It changes things.

Those two love each other. He can't say how much, exactly, or in what way, but they love each other. He kinda knew that already. But now he knows they want each other, too, want to be *with* each other, and that... Well, that really throws a wrench in things. Emmett was perfectly content for him and Mike to be each other's shield, each other's crutch, as long as they were relying on each other. Survivors in the jungle. But he can't feel right about that anymore. Will ruined it, tainted it, made it sour. He ripped away the curtain Emmett had been content to take shelter behind, and now the cold, dark world is staring him in the face again.

Because if Emmett is in the way of something, if he's coming between them in some way...

But how is he? *Why* is he? What did he *do*? Why did Mike even go after him if he wanted someone else? Did he not know? Did he not realize until Will kissed him? Maybe. It was that way for Emmett, when Danny kissed him.

So maybe Mike's not to blame. And maybe Will is to blame, maybe he isn't. But, *fuck*, somebody has to be blamed here! Emmett has to have *somebody* to curse and rage at, even silently, from within his own mind as he makes restless circles around the house. Up and down the stairs. Up and down and up again, driving his mother nuts.

Maybe *he's* to blame. Maybe it's Emmett's own damn fault for dating somebody just to date somebody, just for company. Maybe this is what he gets for thinking he could take shelter in another person.

Downstairs, the phone rings. Once, twice. Then his aunt's footsteps cross the floor, the ringing stops, and a moment later she hollers, "Otter! It's for you!"

Emmett heaves himself up, cat riding on his shoulder, and descends the stairs to the living room. His aunt hands over the phone and picks up a basket of laundry, securing it against her hip as she hauls it off towards the washer.

"Hello?"

He's expecting one of his friends from Washington. Amanda or Warren, maybe. They call him every week or so.

But instead of Warren's stoner-baritone or Manda's bubbly *Hello, hello, hello!*, it's a much, much more familiar voice. One that he hasn't heard since he left Washington.

"Hey, Otter."

All the air leaves the room. Only his family calls him that.

His family, and his ex.

"Danny," he breathes. He wants to say something clever, like *To what do I owe the pleasure?*, something Mike might say, but Emmett isn't handy with words like that. All he can manage is, "Hi."

"How've you been? How was the move? I mean, I heard about some of it from the band."

"It's been fine." He swallows. "Hawkins is... really boring," he chuckles, and Danny gives a chuckle of his own and Emmett feels his chest tighten. And then, anxious to fill the beat of silence that follows, he says, "Is there something you... I mean, why'd you call?"

A moment of quiet. He can hear a click, like Danny opened his mouth but couldn't decide what to say right away. "I... just wanted to talk to you."

There's a smile creeping into the corners of Emmett's lips. Slowly, he sinks to the arm of the couch, perching there.

“Okay.”

Will covers his face with a laugh. His cheeks are red and he’s swaying a little, an old nervous habit crawling back to haunt him, but the cold helps to disguise all that. They’re outside, sitting on the front porch steps, getting a breath of the fresh, cold air. Their cheeks are red anyway, and if Will is rocking a little bit, well, he’s just moving to keep the blood flowing.

It’s been, how many weeks since he came out to Mike? A month and a half, at least. Yeah. Early December to late January. And he still gets flustered talking about this stuff. Liking guys. *Kissing* guys. Don’t get him wrong, he loves having these conversations. He just can’t quite get through them without nervous-laughing a lot and covering his lower face with his dorky Mom Mittens under the pretense of keeping warm.

“The *prop closet*?” Mike is saying, eyes alight with intrigue. “But there’s no lock. What do you do if -?”

“Well we’re just kissing, it’s not like we have our clothes off.” Mike makes a face that means, *You’re a braver man than I*, and Will shoves him. “Like *you* never make out at school. In fact -!”

Mike starts to protest and Will talks over him, jabbing a finger into the chest of his jacket.

“In *fact*, I’ve *seen* you make out at school. In the *hallway*. ”

“That was not making out, that -”

“Oh, uh huh. Okay.”

“It was a *kiss*, and it wasn’t a *hallway*, it was behind the stage, and it was *after* school -”

“All I’m hearing is excuses.”

Mike snorts. “Fine, get your ass caught. Don’t come crying to me when you have to flee the country.”

"We're not gonna get caught," Will mutters. He picks up a stick from beside the steps and starts poking holes in a hard patch of old snow that's managed to survive several melts and freezes.

Mike picks up on the shift of energy - of course he does - and Will sees him lean forward a little in his peripheral vision. He takes a shallow breath, getting ready to say something, but it never comes out. When Will looks over, Mike is pondering the clouded-over sky. The winter dusk is already setting in, turning one horizon a rich steel-gray.

"What?" Will prods, and Mike shrugs.

"It's nothing. It's dumb."

Will turns a little, shuffling on the creaky step to face him. "No, say it."

Mike looks at the treetops again, then his shoes, and then finally at Will. "Tell me what you're thinking. I wanna know what's happening in there." His eyes flick to Will's forehead and then back down, as if indicating the inside of his skull.

Will slants his eyes at him. Odd. Or, it would be, coming from anyone else. But Mike has always had a way of voicing solemn, bookish thoughts with a seriousness others would be hard-pressed to pull off. Ever since he was little, and adults would laugh at his grave little voice very earnestly quoting things he'd heard in movies and using words like *tantamount* and *travails*.

Will shuffles his feet, resumes scraping patterns into the ice, and spits it out. "I dunno. You think I should just sleep with him?"

His head twists around automatically with the words, as if he'll find his mother listening at a window, but of course she's not. It's winter; all the windows and doors are closed. And besides, she's in the back of the house fixing dinner. Still, he keeps his voice low. This isn't the type of thing he'd like to be overheard saying.

Mike doesn't hesitate a second to respond. "I mean, it kind of sounds like you don't want to."

"I don't -" Will draws his shoulders up - not quite a shrug, more of an uncertain constricting of the muscles. "Not want to."

"Well it just sounds like you keep trying to talk yourself into it. Or - out of it. Or something."

"I know!" He kicks his legs out in frustration and reclines on the steps, elbows propping him up, frowning at the sky. "That's what's so stupid, like, it shouldn't be this complicated. I'm just nervous, I mean - there are so many things that could go wrong, or that I could fuck up, or -" He brings his hands up to cover his face again, embarrassed. "I dunno. But I guess I'm never gonna be less nervous if I never try. I'll just be a nervous virgin forever."

He laughs, trying to bury his awkwardness under humor, but Mike's face is serious.

"Look, man, if you're nervous about it you probably shouldn't."

"I mean, were you... you know... nervous with Emmett? The first..."

He gestures vaguely, face still flaming. They've *never* talked this frankly about sex together, outside of joking around.

And except for that time on Christmas, which Will decides doesn't count because it wasn't in person, and because he still can't quite believe that happened.

"The first time?"

Mike pauses. When Will glances over, he's staring off into the distance again. "If you feel weird about it before, you're gonna feel worse after. It's not worth it."

There's a surety, a note of experience to the statement that Will doesn't like. And as he turns to stare, seeing the little frown pinching between Mike's brows, the pieces come together.

Oh, Mike, he thinks, feeling his heart break a little in his chest. *No*.

The image haunts him for days. He'll be eating dinner or trying to sleep and suddenly he's seeing Mike, tense and unsure, agreeing to

something he doesn't really want. Wincing, maybe, as Emmett pushes in. Getting up afterwards and feeling *weird*, feeling gross, like there's something coating his insides that he can't wash off. It makes Will grit his teeth, shoulders tensing until his brother notices and asks what's wrong. And if he starts greeting Mike with a hug for the next several days, holding on just a little tighter than necessary, well, that's nobody's business.

Valentine's Day is just under three weeks away, and Mike has plans.

At least, he has part of a plan. He has an *idea*. Plan still pending.

Chocolates are fine, but lame. Well, he's still going to get chocolates. Obviously. But he also has some vague ideas involving a movie - would it be too obvious to go to the theater together on Valentine's Day? Maybe they better watch something at home. Is there any place Mike could find a gay romance movie? Do those exist? Do they sell them in the back room of the video store or something? Is there a gay movie black market? He heard somebody sniggering about a lesbian romance once, something with *Desert* in the title. Could he find that? Maybe they'll just have to settle for something a little more unobtrusive. *Rocky Horror Picture Show*? Not the best Valentine's Day material. *Stand By Me*? He's not even sure it's on VHS yet. *Dune*? Emmett wouldn't like it. *Fame*? No good. Reminds him too much of watching it with Will.

He'll figure something out. In any case, he's thinking: movie. Candles. Wine, perhaps? Could he sneak some from his parents' collection without them noticing? Probably. Something sweet, maybe, like one of those bubbly dessert wines. He might even be able to swipe actual wine glasses to pour it into. He'd have to transport them to Emmett's house, though. They can't spend Valentine's at Mike's house, his parents would be way too suspicious. At least Emmett's family is chill.

Or maybe -

Or maybe. Maybe they could go somewhere. Not a restaurant or anything, that's asking for trouble. But maybe they could pack up the car, drive out... Is it too cold for camping? It's too cold for camping,

isn't it? So maybe something during the day? Or maybe he should just stick with the indoors ideas. Vaguely gay movie, chocolates, wine, sex. All most likely in Emmett's attic. That's enough, right? It feels a little lazy. That's basically what they're doing now, without the wine. Should he be planning more? Maybe he should rethink the excursion idea.

Maybe he's *over* thinking it.

Mike sighs and slides down further into his blanket cocoon. He'd love to write some of this down, start hammering out a cohesive game plan, but Emmett is right next to him. You don't plan a murder out loud, and you don't plan Valentine's Day where your partner can see it. Plus, maybe Emmett has plans of his own. What if Mike is sitting here stressing over this and Emmett already has a whole evening planned out? Mike glances over, studying his boyfriend out of the corner of his eye. What kind of thing would Emmett plan? He honestly has no clue.

"Hey." Mike slides over, disturbing his nest of blankets to place a kiss on the corner of Emmett's mouth. It's snowing outside - heavily, in fact - and Mike already called his parents to let them know he'd be out for the night. No way he's going anywhere in *that*. "What were you thinking for Valentine's Day?"

It's several moments before Emmett responds. He's staring through the TV. They've watched this movie before, and neither of them are really paying attention. "Yeah," he says eventually, "Uh. I hadn't really thought about it."

Mike scoots a little closer. Emmett stands up. Mike watches him wander away from the couch, a little confused. Why has he been so avoidant of touch today? Will sometimes has days where physical touch bothers him, and he'd rather keep his distance, but Mike has never seen it happen with Emmett. Is something wrong? Did he do something?

"I was thinking we could find a movie," Mike offers.

"Yeah."

“Or... something else. I mean, do you wanna go somewhere?”

A lighter strikes, once, twice. When Emmett turns, he’s got a slender Menthol between his fingers. Mike remembers loving that smell, in the dappled sunny days of October, when they’d walk side-by-side along the leaf-strewn sidewalks. Now it makes him grimace.

“Inside? Really?”

Emmett paces past him, cracking the window with a pointed look back at Mike.

“Great, now it’s cold,” Mike grumps, wrapping himself more securely in the duvet. “Isn’t your mom gonna smell it?”

“She hasn’t come up here in days.”

“Okay, well.” Mike spreads his hands in frustration. “My parents are gonna smell it, though. It’s gonna get into my clothes, they’re gonna _”

“Yeah, okay. I hear you.” Emmett stubs it out in the soap dish he uses as an ashtray, blows smoke out the window and walks back to the center of the room. Mike watches him with a quirked eyebrow. Something’s up.

“Okay, what?”

“What?”

“What do you mean, what?” He finally leaves his cocoon, shrugging off the blankets to stand and follow him. “What’s up? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s -”

“Something clearly is!” Mike winces at his own outburst. Okay, yeah, that was immature of him. That’s not the right way to do this. He takes a breath, trying to steady himself. What’s the right way to handle this? “I just,” he tries again, measuring his words carefully. “Wish you’d talk to me. Just *talk* to me.”

He almost grimaces again, because now he sounds like a nagging

girlfriend. But at least he seems to have made some headway. Emmett gives another long sigh, faces Mike, and leans against the end of his bed. He chews on his words for a good long time. Long enough that Mike starts to think he's doing that thing where he never answers. Snow drifts past the streetlight outside, the flakes lit up gold in the cone of light. Behind Mike, the movie plays on, the audio fuzzy as it filters through the shitty speakers.

Mike wants to say something else, to break the silence, but he knows if he presses Emmett might start the whole process over again. So he waits, awkward, not knowing what to do with his hands.

And finally, finally, Emmett looks somewhere over Mike's shoulder and says, "I'm not sure if we should do this anymore."

Mike swivels his head. Do what? Fight? Watch movies?

"Do...?"

"This." Emmett gestures between them, looking about as comfortable as a man with several live hornets crawling around under his clothes. "Us."

Mike's insides twist. He stares, and then when his boyfriend doesn't elaborate he opens his mouth and says, woodenly, "Are you breaking up with me?"

Emmett's arms are crossed tight across his chest. He still won't meet Mike's eyes; now he's examining the wooden floorboards between them. "Yeah, I guess so."

Those hornets have found their way into Mike's stomach. Did he hear right? How did this happen? When he and El broke up there were weeks - honestly, *months* of fights and cold shoulders and pouting and *clues*. Reasons. Warning signs. *End of relationship: 50 miles! Better stop for a snack and a bathroom break now! Buckle up, cowboy, you're in for a ride!*

But this... Where did this come from? It's... it's not fair. He doesn't even know what he did.

Mike makes a sound that might be "but" or might be "well," stepping

forward, head bowed a little. Trying to look conciliatory. He tries again, remembering English well enough this time to say, "I don't - what did I do? Can I fix it? I... You never told me something was..."

"Well you didn't..." Emmett shrugs with his arms still crossed. "Do anything, I just don't really think this is working out."

"Well could we try? I mean, could we work it out?"

Mike is trying not to get mad. Really? One rough patch and that's it, sayonara? He's not even gonna try to make an effort? Things get hard and he's out? Nice. Real fucking nice, Mitch.

Emmett is shaking his head a little, rubbing at his neck like it's sore. "That's not... really what I... ah... Listen, I, I've been talking to Danny on the phone. He called me last week."

Oh.

Oh, so *that's* what this is.

Mike joins Emmett in his thorough inspection of the floor. He's horrified to feel tears swelling up, the backs of his eyes and nose heating, his throat getting tight. He digs his fingernails into his palm, hard, to try to distract himself and shove down the tears.

Fuck.

"So," he says, and, shit, his voice is rough. "That's it then? Just... Thanks for everything, I have my ex again, bye?"

"Look, it's not that serious, man." Emmett's voice is aggravatingly soft, almost unbothered. "You needed somebody, I needed somebody. You know? It wasn't that serious."

Ow. Fuck, ow.

The tears well up, and Mike turns away and stares at the ceiling to hide them. After a breath or two, once he's controlled his voice by sheer power of will, he speaks in a near-monotone. "And now that somebody else is an option, I'm out of the picture, right? Just straight out to the curb."

“Oh, you’re one to fucking talk!”

It’s so unexpected that Mike looks back, two tears falling with the movement. He doesn’t think he’s *ever* heard Emmett get angry before. Not really. Not his even-keeled, amiable boyfriend.

Or... ex.

But Emmett *is* mad. He’s gone red, right up to the ears, and he glares as he snaps, “At least I break up with somebody *before* going after somebody else. You know, like a reasonable person that doesn’t sneak around behind people’s backs.”

Mike knows what he’s talking about. How could he not know? But what is he supposed to say? He just blinks, too startled for more tears to form, and eventually gets out a blank, “What?”

“Oh, don’t.” Emmett pushes off the bedframe and wanders first one way and then the other, restless. “You kissed Will after the play, Mike. Don’t play dumb. I’m really not in the mood.”

Mike feels a little cold. He didn’t see them. He couldn’t have seen them, they were in a locked room. Which means...

“He told you about that?”

“He apologized, yeah.”

He doesn’t even know whether to be mad about it or not. He just trips over his words, all his talent for speaking gone up in a puff of smoke. “That wasn’t... I didn’t... I should have told you.”

Emmett just gives his head a little toss - an almost dismissive gesture.

“No, really, I knew I should have said something. I should have said something. I’m sorry. I’m -”

“Oh, save it.” The words are exhaled into Emmett’s hands, like he’s exhausted. He pushes the hair back from his face. It’s in need of a haircut, and all at once Mike realizes that when he cuts off the silver ends, he might look like a particularly tall Byers. Mouse brown hair,

narrow frame, nervous mannerisms. "It's fine. I get it. Look, I'm happy, even. You're obviously not gonna do too bad without me."

"Don't say that." The tears are trying to come back and Mike wrestles them down. *Don't cry. Don't be a baby. Man up already.*

"Why not?"

Mike blanks. He can't think of a response to that, and after a few seconds something in him snaps. He's about to break down, no matter how hard he tries to stop it, and he can't be here for that. He can't. His pride is already bruised enough, he *will not* stand here and cry in front of the ex that just broke his fucking heart.

So he sniffs, once, and gives a single curt nod, and starts gathering his stuff. Backpack, jacket, shoes. He grabs his sweater, the one Emmett had been borrowing, off the back of a chair and stuffs it in his bag.

Emmett drifts after him. "What are you doing?"

Mike presses his lips together and keeps moving. *What the hell does it look like I'm doing?*

"Mike, cut it out. Don't be a drama queen. You're gonna leave now? In *that*?" Mike isn't looking at him, but he registers the movement of an arm. Emmett was waving at the window, at the dark night full of snow and wind.

Mike zips up his backpack in one motion and swings it onto his shoulders over his coat. "Yup."

"No. C'mon. You can sleep on the couch or something. Don't be stupid."

"Good to know I'm stupid, too."

"Oh, come *on*, Michael, don't be an ass just because - hey!" Emmett spreads his arms as Mike passes him, heading for the stairs without looking back. "Mike!"

He just needs to leave. He just needs to go, to walk out the door and

keep walking, blizzard be damned.

He leaves the door open behind him as one last gesture of pettiness, slips down both flights of stairs as quickly and quietly as he can, darts past the living room where someone is watching TV, and eases the front door open and closed. The last thing he wants is a concerned adult trying to chase after him.

And then he's out. Into the cold, into the snow. He doesn't even have a hat.

He crosses the lawn on wooden legs, angling for the back road out of habit. But his sneakers are already wet by the time he gets across the yard, snow getting up into the hems of his jeans, wind blasting against his face so hard it makes him stumble. He lets a sob push up his throat. Fuck. This isn't fair. He's already cold, and wet, and the flakes sting his cheeks when the wind buffets him, and he feels so stupid. So fucking stupid.

He falters, moving one way and then another. Biking from here to his house is one thing. Walking the distance in a snowstorm, at night, with no hat or gloves... that's another. But there's no way in hell he's going back and knocking on Emmett's door again. Nope. He'd rather die.

He turns back, walking past the tall, narrow house and heading further away from town. He'll have to cut through the woods, but that's all right. At least Will's house is closer.

Jonathan sticks his head through Will's door, pulling down headphones just long enough to say, "Hey, I think Mike's coming up the driveway."

Will looks up from his drawing, still miles away. "Huh?"

"Mike." Jonathan re-adjusts the headphones over his ears. "Saw him through the window."

Will glances at his own window, putting aside his sketchbook to stand. Mike, out, tonight? It's blizzarding. What is he doing? Wasn't

he gonna be at Emmett's tonight?

But sure enough, when there's a knock on the front door and Will's mom goes to answer it, the first thing she says is, "Mike!"

"Hey, Mrs. Byers. Joyce." There's the sound of the door closing and the *thump* of two wet shoes being kicked off. "Sorry, I was gonna walk home, but there's kind of a blizzard and you guys were closer. Mind if I...?"

"No, not at all! Good to see you, sweetie, I feel like I'm at work whenever you're over. Haven't talked to you in weeks. How's it going? How are you doing? Will! Mike's -"

She turns mid-holler to see Will already approaching.

"Oh. Thought you were in your room. Look who I found." She ruffles his hair, dislodging a little tumble of melting snow, then looks at her wet hand and says, "I'll get you a towel. You boys want any hot chocolate? It's a doozy out there. *Brr!* "

Will knows something is up the moment Mike looks at him. He sees the rim of red around his eyes that can't be chalked up to the cold, and the way Mike is being a little *too* careful about how he's standing and how he speaks, and just like that he knows Mike is balancing on the delicate edge of a breakdown. Probably trying to hold it together while Will's mom is around.

Mike catches his eyes as he walks up, and Will gives a sympathetic smile.

"Hey." He pauses, wondering how direct to be. "You okay?"

Mike's face crumples for the briefest of moments before he pulls it together again. Oops. Shit. Too direct. Backpedal, backpedal. But before Will can redirect, his mom appears and holds out a faded mauve towel to Mike.

"Here you go, sweetie." Her head ducks as she looks him fully in the face for the first time, her expression suddenly going sad as she realizes he's biting back tears. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Mike sucks in a breath, lets it out slowly, and turns an interesting blotchy shade of pink as he croaks, "I think I'll take you up on that hot chocolate, if that's okay."

"Oh - yeah." Joyce rubs his shoulder like she used to do to Will when he was little, immediately entering Mom Mode. "Of course. Marshmallows?"

"Please," Mike grates out, using the towel to hide his face as he blots at his hair.

Will hooks an arm around his elbow, gently tugging them towards his room.

"We'll -" he calls towards the kitchen, gesturing vaguely. "We're gonna -"

"Okay," Joyce calls back. "I'll knock when it's ready."

They make it as far as Will's bed, Mike's snow-covered backpack hitting the ground by the door, before Mike loses it. Full-on, face-in-hands, shoulders-heaving, snotty, silent sobbing.

Well, shit, Will thinks, locating his tissue box and trash can and putting them within arm's reach. *That's no good.*

Is somebody in the hospital? Did his parents finally split?

And then Will remembers that Mike was supposed to visit Emmett tonight, and he hates himself for the tiny little flicker of hope he feels. *Wow, asshole*, he thinks at himself, wrapping an arm around Mike's back. *Your best friend is clearly miserable and you're like, Gee, I hope he had a breakup! You're such a dick.*

He steels himself. He cannot have a bout of self hatred right now. This isn't the time. This is about whatever's going on with Mike. He can beat himself up later.

Mike's sobbing fit only lasts a minute or two. Apparently he just needed to flush it all out of his system - whatever it is that he's been holding in. He's calmer by the time Joyce knocks softly, passing two hot mugs through the door and grimacing sympathetically. *I'll be out*

here, she mouths, and then retreats.

Mike accepts his mug with a little quirk of the lips. “You Byers and hot cocoa,” he mutters, then slurps up several small marshmallows. “Shit. Hot.”

“It’s a cure-all.” Will blows on his own mug, then sets it aside. He doesn’t know whether to pry, and eventually he decides it wouldn’t be helpful. He knows *he* always hates it when people push too hard and too soon about his own miseries. So he just says, “You wanna borrow some dry clothes so you can stop dripping on my bed?”

Mike twists, looking down at the wet spot he’s been creating. “Oh. ‘m sorry -”

Will bats a hand, already on the way to his dresser. He has some hand-me-down PJs of Jonathan’s that have always been a little big on him, but might fit Mike okay. Threadbare plaid pajama pants and a green thermal Henley shirt. “It’s cool. I can just toss it in the dryer. Here.”

He remembers at the last second *not* to throw the clothes at Mike’s face, since he’s still holding the mug. It’s a near thing, though.

Mike takes his time, steadily going through tissues between sips of hot chocolate. Will tosses the quilt in the dryer, and within ten minutes it’s dry and toasty hot. He wraps them both in it, sighing with pleasure - ah, lovely, shadow-killing warmth - before Mike finally says something.

“So,” he begins, nose still a little plugged. “Guess who broke up with me.”

Will’s eyes close. *Ah*. He feels, suddenly and irrationally, like *he* caused that with his half-wish a few minutes ago. He rubs Mike’s back, feeling the ragged breaths jump beneath his palm.

“I guess Emmett.”

“Ding ding ding,” Mike drones, dully.

"Wow. That. I'm sorry." What are you supposed to say in these situations?

Mike just nods, his eyes puffy and unfocused.

"That sucks," Will tries again, feeling like he's botching this whole thing. Does Mike want to talk about it? Does he not want to talk about it? Eventually he ventures, "Did he say why?"

Mike gives a harsh laugh and for a moment Will is afraid he said the wrong thing, but then Mike says, "His ex called him."

"Oh. Wow. So they're back together, just like that?"

"No. I don't know. I don't think so." Mike blows his nose again, discarding another tissue, then sniffs and goes on. "He just said he called and..." He peers at Will over another tissue, his face wet and blotchy. "And, uh, he was a little mad about... That we..."

Will thinks he knows where this is going, but he doesn't want it to be true, so he just waits. Eventually Mike looks away again, reaching for the last of his cocoa.

"You know. That we kissed that one time."

Will exhales. "Shit, Mike, I'm sorry." He bites back a sudden, fierce surge of his own tears. He cannot, will not cry right now. This is about Mike. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to ruin your -"

Mike is already shaking his head, talking over him. "I don't even care, honestly. I mean, I do, obviously I do, but." He tosses the tissue into the trash with the others and scoots back to lean against Will's headboard. Will moves to sit beside him. Mike just breathes for a moment, re-settling the quilt around both their shoulders and toying with one fraying corner. "We were really kind of drifting apart anyway. You know? Like, for a while. It's like he just wouldn't *connect* with me, whatever I did. He never talked to me. It was like - he was just a *wall*."

Mike makes a flat-handed gesture, up and down, tracing out the surface of the imaginary barrier. Will tries not to turn and give him an incredulous look. He's never heard this before. As far as he ever

knew, Mike's relationship was going great. How long had it been going downhill? Why didn't Mike ever say anything?

Mike goes on, oblivious to Will's confusion. "But what..." His voice closes around the words and a fresh wave of tears wells and spills over. He presses his lips together for a second, chin dimpling as he fights it. His words wobble as he forces it out. "What really bothers me is that I was just *disposable* to him."

"What?"

Anger is leaping up in Will's chest, spreading and crackling like flame. What the fuck? *Disposable*? What the fuck did Emmett say to him? Does he have to march over there through a blizzard and kick that blonde fucker's ass? He'd do it. Usually Will is all about nonviolence. But right now, with Mike sagging against him and breathing in hiccupping little breaths, Will truly wants to punch that asshole in the eye socket.

"He said it was *nothing serious*. He kept saying that. And it's not like I expected us to get *m-married* or anything, but I kind of thought..." He draws in a stuttering breath. "I thought he actually liked me. *Me*. You know? I th-thought he wanted *me*, and I guess it turns out he just wanted *somebody*. And then his ex turns up out of the blue and it's like - bye, wo-on't be needing you anymore!"

Mike goes quiet again, holding his breath to smother the jolting of his diaphragm, and Will squeezes his arm around Mike's shoulders. It's a good thing Mike's head is down, forehead pushed against his knees, because otherwise he'd probably catch sight of the stormy glare on Will's face.

I'll kill him, he thinks. *I swear, I'm gonna kill him*.

Mike gives a heaving, humorless laugh, voice strangled as he speaks into his knees. "I kind of thought that for once in my life I was somebody's first choice, but I should have known I was just *convenient*."

You're my first choice, Will thinks, and maybe if he presses his forehead against Mike's damp curls hard enough the thought will

filter through. *You were always my first choice.*

He doesn't say it.

He *wants* to. Mike is curled up in his bed, sharing Will's quilt, all red-nosed and pink-cheeked from crying and looking vulnerable and miserable, and Will wants so, so badly to kiss him. To make the hurt go away and hold him tight. He wants to gently pull Mike's chin up and fit their lips together and whisper, *I choose you, I want you, I love you.*

And he tells himself, *Absolutely not. I can't believe I would even think about that right now. Mike just went through a breakup with someone else, it is absolutely not okay to be thinking like that.*

So he lies down and pulls Mike on top of him, letting him cry himself out on Will's shoulder like they're five again, and he doesn't make a single move.

Mike should probably be more embarrassed about this. About crying on Will's shoulder like he's a little kid. About crying at all. Isn't he supposed to rage around and kick things and yell? That would be acceptably masculine.

But who the fuck cares. It's just Will here. Joyce appeared briefly with an offering of hot chocolate, and hasn't returned since, although Mike has heard some movement in the kitchen. And he hasn't seen Jonathan since he got here and they gave each other a brief wave. It's just Will, and... well, they've seen plenty of each other's snot. If a little breakdown was gonna shake them apart, it would have happened years ago. Plus, Mike has held and talked Will through flashback and nightmare aplenty, even coaching him through the occasional panic attack. He thinks he's earned himself some judgement-free ugly crying.

Still, he's a little shamefaced when he winds down from his second wave. He sits up, moving off of Will under the pretense of blowing his nose again - and he probably should anyway, before he starts smearing mucus on Will's shirt. But when he finishes and turns back, Will just silently opens his arms again.

He hesitates, but - why the hell not.

Mike crawls back over Will, lowering himself down with a sigh, and lets Will gently scratch his nails up and down his back. He tries not to shiver at the sensation.

This is one of those queer-friend perks. They never would have been this snuggly before they were out to each other, when they were still both terrified of driving the other away. Now they don't care.

And maybe that's not entirely a good thing, because it's giving Mike ideas. He's been struggling this whole time not to give Will eyes. He's hurting and shaken and empty, emotionally raw, and Will is being so sweet to him. Wrapping him in warm blankets and giving him pajamas to borrow and holding him and letting him cry all over him. Murmuring that it's not fair, it's not right, Emmett was a prick and he should have been honest with Mike. And Mike has to remind himself over and over that Will is just being a good friend, and this is *not* the time to kiss him again. Mike's emotions are all over the place. He's unbalanced. Exposed. Sensitive. This isn't the time to be making decisions, *especially* where romance is involved. Not after that breakup.

He wants to lift his cheek from Will's chest and crawl up just a few inches further, lower his mouth to Will's, roll their hips gently together until Will is hard in his pants, panting and squirming. He wants to just burrow under the blankets and peel off his borrowed pajamas, the ones that smell like Will, and offer himself up for the taking.

Please just be close to me, something in his chest cries out softly, *please just be with me*.

But, he reminds himself sternly, he can do that now. He *is* doing that now. He's about as close to Will as he can get, barring... certain activities. And that should be enough. He doesn't need kisses, no matter how much he'd like them, and he certainly doesn't need sex. And he *really* doesn't need to be asking Will for either of those things, when they both know perfectly well that it's a bad idea right now. Plus, just because Will wanted him at some point in the past doesn't mean he feels the same way anymore. People change. Feelings

change. And it wouldn't be right to put that pressure on him when he's already done so much for Mike.

This is enough. This is so much more than enough. Just Will's warmth, his scent, his rhythmic breathing and heartbeat under Mike's ear, his fingers softly scratching patterns into Mike's back, making goosebumps rise under his touch. In fact, it's enough to lull Mike into a dreamless sleep without him even realizing it. He wakes up a few hours later, jumping a little at the figure looming over them.

"Sorry," Joyce whispers. "Didn't mean to wake you."

She clicks off the lamp, casting Mike's deep blush into darkness, and slips out the door.

Notes for the Chapter:

Fellas is it gay to fall asleep in your best friend's arms after crying your heart out on top of him?

ONE MORE CHAPTER LEFT AAAHHH (unless I miscalculated and it ends up being two, but like, probably one)

As always, I LOVE hearing any and all of your thoughts!

EDIT 2/22/21: So I'm writing Ch 9 now and it turns out I have much more to say than I thought. We're looking at 10 chapters.

9. Valentine's Plans

Notes for the Chapter:

So before you read, please note: there was more than I expected and I had to split the last chapter into two, so now **this** is the second-to-last chapter. That is all. Carry on.

January bleeds into February, and Mike slinks through his days with his head down. Studiously avoiding Emmett in class, doing his best to play-act Normal Mike to his friends and acquaintances at school until he can go home and drop the smile. He didn't sign up for this semester's play - too much going on, too much stress and pressure - so he usually goes home right after school. And stays there. Sure, he'll go over to Dustin or Lucas or Max's place if they ask, or he'll go with the Party to buy snacks at the grocery store or hang around the park while Max teaches El a skateboard trick, but only if someone asks him. If someone invites him along somewhere and it would be suspect to turn them down, he accepts. Sure. Yeah. Up for anything. But if he can quietly disappear after school and lock himself away in his room, so much the better. He's too tired to be around people right now. Too drained. He feels stretched thin, most days, and all he wants to do is get home and hide away in his own room, his safe haven, where no one can touch him and he doesn't have to keep up a cheerful expression for anyone.

He's not usually this closemouthed about his own inner workings. Isn't that what everyone says? Heart on his sleeve? Wouldn't he usually be stomping around, glowering, snapping at everyone and rolling his eyes and letting everyone know how miserable he is? Except that would require an explanation. The Party would, eventually, get sick of his attitude and demand to know what his damage is, and what would he say then?

He doesn't know how to explain to the Party what happened. When they ask why Emmett doesn't come around anymore, he shrugs and keeps his eyes on the DM Monster Manual and says they had a disagreement. He can sense them glancing at each other just outside of his field of vision, unsatisfied with his vagary, but what else can he

say? *Oh, Emmett was actually a queer and by the way so am I, and he came around as long as I was making out with him or fucking him, but as soon as he got bored of me I wasn't worth anything anymore ?*

Anyway, he feels uncomfortably *seen* enough already. Raw. Naked. First the disastrous coming out to Will, just a couple months ago, and then that terrifying-exhilarating stretch of time when he was openly in a gay relationship *in front of someone else*, and then the breakup. Feeling abruptly and acutely like Emmett had looked at Mike in all his honest, exposed humanness and found him lacking. Deficient, in some way. Not even worth trying. Not worth exploring. Not worth the time or effort.

Mike opened up to him. He fucking opened up to Emmett, or at least he damn well *tried*, over and over. He made himself vulnerable, shared things about himself that he's barely told anyone, offered himself up for connection. He gave Emmett his goddamn virginity, for fuck's sake. Even though it made his palms sweat and his stomach clench with nerves, every single time. Even though it hurt a little, sometimes, because he was just so idiotically anxious. Even after the first few times, when it should have been familiar. He just couldn't tamp down that little acid-buzz of anxiety, in his gut, in his throat, in his unsteady hands. He couldn't make himself relax, not completely, and the harder he tried the harder it became as he fixated on it. Like trying to fall asleep on a sleepless night. The more he strained towards it, the further it slipped from his fingers, until all he could think about was that he wasn't doing this right, he couldn't even do *this*, why can't he just do this?

It was worst when Emmett noticed. He'd see Mike's little grimace and pause, strands of hair falling in his face, thigh muscles shaking just a little as he held himself back.

You okay?

Yeah.

You sure?

Yeah. Just nervous.

Why? We've done this like six times. At least.

I know. I know, I'm just - I'm not used to it. I'm okay.

Well, do - d'you want to stop, or...?

No! I'm fine. I'm good. Let's just keep going.

And Mike would hike his knees up around Emmett's torso, egging him on, trying to exude confidence, determined not to ruin this. He would not ruin this. He could do this. He would do this, for his partner. And it did feel good sometimes, really fucking good, when he was able to push past the brick wall in his mind and tap into that elusive current of pleasure, finally losing himself to animal instinct. It was a triumph, when he was able to do that. He'd come down afterwards, shaking and sticky and relishing that familiar soreness, and he'd think, *There, see, was that so damn hard? Why can't it be like that every time? Why is it always so difficult?*

And the rest of the time, when he just couldn't break through the wall, he'd grit his teeth and ride it out. Some days were better than others. He supposes that's just how it is for everyone.

And then, of course, the breakdown with - or, more accurately, *on* - Will. He squirms a little when he thinks about it, red-faced, embarrassed. Although, it's just Will, so he's not *that* embarrassed. But still. Sobbing openly, leaking saltwater and snot out of his face and struggling to speak clearly, feels beyond pathetic. He doesn't like that version of himself. The soft, sniveling, weak version of himself that *takes* from people's energy instead of giving. He doesn't like to do that. He doesn't like to be that. Not even with Will, whose trustworthiness Mike doesn't doubt for a second. At least - not anymore. Not since that one awful week.

It's a lot. The past half year or so has been a lot. New relationship, relationship stress, disastrous coming out, and then *being* out, and then the breakup, and then the break *down*, and now the fallout. He's expended nearly every bit of energy he has, used up every fuck at his disposal, and he's tired. He's barely keeping on top of homework assignments, completing only what he absolutely needs to keep his grades from dipping; forget theater and socializing.

He hasn't seen Will a whole lot. They see each other at school and with the Party, and every so often they'll hang out. But Mike has been keeping his distance, for the most part, and Will has been taking his cues from Mike. Giving him space. Mike has already burdened Will enough, that first night. It wouldn't be right to keep using him as a shoulder to cry on, literally or otherwise. It's not Will's responsibility to be Mike's therapist, and especially not about this. It wouldn't be fair to make Will comfort him about his breakup. Not considering their... history. Will is probably glad to have gotten over Mike and put all that messiness behind him, after what happened in December. Mike doesn't need to be dragging things up again.

Especially because he keeps hoping, somewhere in the back of his mind, that Will isn't over him after all. That maybe there's a chance that...

He tries not to think about it too much. Doesn't dare think about it too much.

It's been a relatively good day. Mike blazed right through a math test with very little stress, joked with Max at lunch, and managed to read almost a chapter in his latest book under the desk without teachers noticing. Now, at the end of the school day, he and Dustin are meeting in the AV room to swap some homework assignments before heading out.

Mike is tapping a pile of papers into alignment when Dustin reaches out, a little awkwardly, and pats him twice on the shoulder. Mike gives him a confused little smile, pleased but unsure where this small display of affection is coming from, and Dustin holds his gaze to say, "You feeling okay, man? You seemed a little better today."

Mike hesitates. "Better?"

Dustin shrugs and goes back to filling his backpack. "I know you've been having a bad time lately," he states. Blunt and matter-of-fact as a scientific statistic.

Mike glances at him, taken aback for a moment. He thought he'd been pretty good about keeping things under wraps. He thought he

seemed normal, for the most part. But then, he's always been terrible about hiding what he's feeling and keeping things on the down-low. Maybe he's been beyond obvious, despite his attempts. Or maybe it's just that Dustin is perceptive - more perceptive than people often remember. They're charmed by his sweet and goofy demeanor, forgetting that under the big smiles and dorkiness is a calculating, capable scientist, insightful and astute. Maybe Dustin saw right past Mike's tired smile.

Or maybe - and Mike pauses for a moment, considering this - maybe Dustin *knows*. Maybe his perceptiveness picked up on more than just Mike's recent moods. Maybe he, like Will, has known about Mike far longer than Mike ever expected.

He watches his friend out of the corner of his eye, rolling this over in his head. He's considering how much to say, how much to risk. He trusts Dustin. He does. He trusts Dustin to be a good and solid and decent guy. But coming out to him, directly, explicitly? Well, maybe not. Too risky. Too much chance of... well, there are a lot of things that could happen. But maybe just a small risk would be acceptable.

So he hefts on his backpack and says, "Yeah. Well. That thing with Emmett."

He meant to say more. Nothing that would give him away entirely, just something that would finish the sentence fragment. But his tongue is suddenly tied in knots, mimicking his stomach, and he fixes his gaze ahead of him as they leave the AV room and join the flow of the crowd.

"You guys split?"

Mike resists the urge to snap his head around and stare. It was said casually. And the phrasing was innocuous enough. He could have simply meant *gone your separate ways*, or *stopped being friends*.

Or.

"Yup," Mike agrees simply. His heart squeezes behind his ribs.

"Mm," Dustin hums, an acknowledgement carrying as little opinion

or reaction as possible. A beat goes by, and then Dustin's palm slaps down on top of his shoulder again, squeezing for a second before letting go. "Fun times, fun times."

"Quite," Mike quips, and then he can't stop himself from steering the conversation into a whiplash-inducing, beyond obvious left turn just to get away from the topic. "Did you hear those guys behind us in history?"

"Oh, my god," Dustin groans, allowing the turn without comment, and they slip easily into griping about asshole classmates.

But Mike's blood pressure remains just a little higher than usual for the next ten minutes or so, and he's already planning the first thing he'll say to Will the second they're alone: *Dude, I think Dustin totally knew about me and Emmett. I mean, he basically said so. I almost had a heart attack.*

But this is... This is okay. It's okay if Dustin has suspicions. Mike never said anything too incriminating. He can always deny later if need be. Dustin might know what he really means, might not. But this little corner of the truth? He's okay with admitting that.

No way is he ever telling the whole story.

"And that's the whole story, I guess."

El shifts for the first time since Will started talking. She has such an unnerving stillness about her, sometimes. An intensity to her deep brown eyes, which still widen in that earnest way he suspects she's had since she was a scrawny, bald twelve year old freshly escaped from the lab.

Will squirms, a little uncomfortable under the scrutiny. Mike said he could tell her. He said he didn't mind if El knew. It still feels wrong to hand over Mike's part of the narrative like this, like slicing up a fruit and handing the raw chunks of it over to El's waiting hands. But how can he tell his own story without telling Mike's? There's no way to communicate the gravity of what happened anonymously. They're too intertwined. Taking Mike's name out of the equation topples the

whole structure. Mike is integral.

Will was jealous of someone's new boyfriend. Will didn't know that this someone was queer until the boyfriend showed up. Will was upset to be functionally ignored in favor of said boyfriend. Will had a blowup argument with someone, then kissed him, then watched him happily return to the boyfriend - until they broke up. Will held the someone as he cried, comforted him, and every atom in his body wanted to squeeze him as tight as possible and kiss his breathless until he forgot to be sad.

That's a true story. But it's not Will's story. Not quite. Because it wasn't just someone, it wasn't just some random guy or a friend from school, it was Mike. And Mike changes things. Mike changes that whole story, gives it so many more layers, so much more weight.

Will was jealous of *Mike's* new boyfriend, Emmett. Will didn't know that Mike was queer until Emmett showed up. Will was upset to be functionally ignored in favor of Emmett.

Will had a blowup argument with *Mike*, then kissed him, then watched him happily return to his boyfriend - until they broke up.

Will held *Mike* as he cried, comforted him, and every atom in his body wanted to squeeze *Mike* as tight as possible and kiss *Mike* breathless.

Mike, who was definitively unattainable up until that one moment of total shock. *Mike*, the Party leader, the headstrong pacifist, the *Lord of the Rings* dork, Will's best friend since they were five. Mike who worked tirelessly to find Will when he vanished, even when he was presumed dead. Who was with Will every step of the way, barely leaving his side, during the events of the next year. The Mind Flayer, the tunnels, the lab, the shed. Mike, who Will has loved for as long as he can remember, who he's had a crush on since before he even knew he liked boys, who he's been *in* love with for years. Mike, who Will used to idealize those years ago, who is really only human. Who makes mistakes and lashes out and sulks and rages and says stupid, hurtful shit and does stupid, hurtful things sometimes. Who cares deeply about his friends, speaks up for what he believes to be right, feels a responsibility to take care of everyone around him, strives

every year to be a better person than he was last year, and has only ever wanted to tell stories that really matter. From imaginary playground games of surprising moral complexity, despite the childish wrappings, to D&D campaigns that regularly provoke serious discussions of society and science and ethics. Mike, with that one strand of dark hair that always curls just so, constantly brushing the lashes of his left eye, giving him an unconscious habit of flicking his head to shake it away. It's not just *someone*. It's all of *that*. All of that, and so much more. A thousand thousand moments and threads and intricacies, built over a dozen years of being in each other's lives. It's Mike.

El finally breaks her intense eye contact to frown out into the woods. Will pulled down the sheet door a long time ago. The fluttering motion made him sick with anxiety. Seeing just a sliver of the woods beyond, the gap shrinking and swelling and twisting with the wind, the split-second glimpses of the trees... It made him feel like the Demogorgon would be there the second he actually pulled it aside. Faceless head splitting open into a wet, toothy maw, ready to lunge.

Will can deal with a wide-open door. He can deal with a closed door. He *hates* doors that are cracked open. It's the little gap of space that creeps him out. Knowing that something could be there, maybe watching him through the crack, and he might not know unless he took a second glance. And the sheet door at Castle Byers was ten times as bad. Too many memories. Too much like the Upside Down. So he took it down. Now their view to the sparse Indiana woods is unobstructed. If anyone or anything was approaching from that direction, they'd see it coming.

"And they broke up... when?"

Will glances over as El speaks, pulled from his thoughts. "About two weeks ago."

Will barely comes here anymore, and the old fort feels cramped and smells like mud and mildew. But they needed a private place to talk, and El still has a fondness towards small, hand-built safe spaces. The day is mild, for February, but Will is still shivering under his scarf, jacket, sweater, and long sleeved shirt. The cold never leaves his bones during the winter months, and he's starting to wish they could

wrap this up and go home again. But he opened up about this to El for a reason, and he won't shut her down or rush her now. So he stuffs his hands into his sleeves and waits, letting her process the tale in her own time.

Maybe if he shows up at the Wheeler house and plays the role of The Good Kid, he can charm Karen enough to steal Mike away for a school night sleepover. She's usually very reluctant to allow them, but he bets he can convince her better than Mike ever could. Karen has the misguided assumption that Will is a polite, rules-abiding child that always gets good grades and would never do something as stupid as drink alcohol or go to a wild party or, god forbid, get involved in any of that degenerate homosexual stuff.

Will doesn't mind. It's a useful mask to wear when dealing with adults. He can slip it on, smile, and say something about really needing help with some math homework because he has a test later this week and he's just not getting it, and Mike did really well on that test already, and of *course* they won't stay up late on a school night, but could Mike please be allowed to come over and help him out?

And then I'll force him to be my human blanket all night, he concludes with a smirk, shifting again as his butt starts to go numb from the hard wooden pallet that forms the floor. *Take that, cold.*

When El takes another little breath, preparing to speak, Will isn't expecting the sad weight to her voice. "He never told me."

"He never told me, either," Will reasons. "I don't think he told anyone. I don't think he ever would have, if we hadn't fought."

"But he never told *me*, " she repeats. There's an urgent tilt to her words that Will doesn't understand until she shakes her head and says, in a small voice, "Do you think he ever really liked me?"

Will reaches for her hand, automatically. "El, yes. I know he did. Trust me, I heard all about you." His eyes roll - another automatic response, this one at the memories of Mike's never-ending El obsession.

El frowns. "I'm not a boy."

That gives him pause. He hadn't considered that. Since Emmett, he assumed that Mike was queer just like him. As in, *entirely* queer, not interested in girls at all, the same way he is. But that's... not entirely accurate, is it? Or is it?

Mike liked El. He liked her a lot. There's no question about that. And he knows Mike talks about girls, admires girls, has admitted to no shortage of crushes on girls. And for a while there, after Emmett, Will chalked it all up to a kind of necessary performance art. Acting straight to survive, like Will does.

After all, doesn't Will make calculated efforts to invent crushes on female classmates to "admit" to Lucas if pressed? Doesn't he decide every few months which actress he'll "obsess" over now?

What pretty face and curvy body should he rip from a magazine and hang in his locker this month, like a practical talisman against discovery?

He assumed Mike was doing the same. But Mike... he... Somehow, that doesn't feel right when Will applies it to Mike. Aren't there people who don't have a preference? Who would date pretty much anybody, regardless of gender? Is Mike one of those? He doesn't know, and maybe it's not his job to find a label for Mike anyway.

"Yeah," Will says, tilting his head, "But, he liked you, and he liked Emmett."

He shrugs, not knowing how to vocalize what he means, and El's shift of mood surprises him when she quirks one eyebrow and elbows him in the ribs.

"And you."

"Yeah, well." He looks away, scratches his nose. "I mean, sure. He kissed me. Or, he let *me* kiss *him*." *And we jerked off together on the phone*, he thinks but doesn't say, pushing on with a shake of his head. "But that doesn't mean..."

I liked you for so long, Mike's voice says in his head, *I just didn't know what it was*.

Hush, he tells the voice. He said liked, past tense. And who knows what so long meant. Sure, we had some moments after that, but that doesn't mean that -

"You're an idiot," El sighs.

"I am not." He reaches out to shove her and she neatly evades.
"Why?"

But she's already standing, groaning as blood returns to sleeping limbs. "Come on. It's freezing, let's go back."

"Wait, why am I an idiot?"

"Are you coming or not?"

"Ellie!"

Will runs into Emmett the next day.

And, okay, maybe it was a tiny bit intentional. He didn't go *looking* for the guy, exactly, but he knows Emmett usually stops by his locker at the end of the school day, and their lockers are in the same hallway, so can Will be blamed that much for catching his eye as he walks past?

Except now that they've made eye contact, they're standing about five feet apart, trapped in the social expectations of saying hi, neither of them knowing how to approach the other.

For one fleeting childish moment, Will considers brushing past without acknowledgement except maybe to knock their shoulders together or slap the binder out of Emmett's hands. Maybe the prongs are loose. Maybe Emmett's papers would spill everywhere, costing him five minutes of cleanup and longer to get everything organized again. Maybe he'd lose some important assignments.

But he doesn't. He doesn't want to be that much like Troy.

Instead, he fixes a cool, impassive expression on his face and says, "So how's Danny?"

He's rewarded immediately by a flood of color rising into Emmett's pale face. "Fine. Good." He takes a breath, reaching into his locker and pushing books around for no apparent reason. "He and the band want to take a road trip out here for Spring Break. To visit."

How great for them, Will wants to say, but he takes too long trying to think of something better, and Emmett's irritating need to fill the silence wins out.

"How's Mike?" he ventures.

Will's expression flickers. He's caught halfway between the impulse to say, *Oh, he's absolutely fine! Doesn't miss you at all, in fact*, and, *Oh, you know, devastated. Humiliated. You really knocked his self esteem down by a few pegs, you know that? Do you realize that you hurt him? Do you even care?*

He tilts an eyebrow and settles on a barbed echo. "Fine. Good."

Emmett snorts out a breath and slams his locker shut. *Point taken.*

"Great," he says, and brushes past Will into the crowd.

Friday.

It's been nearly three weeks since Mike's breakup, Valentine's Day is just two days away, and Will has spent the last two hours trying to build up the courage to ask if Mike wants to spend it together. Not, like, as *dates*. That's not what he means. He just, he knows Mike was trying to plan something with Emmett, before. And he knows Mike will probably spend the whole day being sad if he's alone. What's difficult about asking is, well, how is he supposed to say, *Hey, do you wanna hang out on Sunday? I know it happens to be Valentine's Day, but I swear I just mean it as friends. I'm not trying to make a move on you or anything*? What's the least weird way to say that?

So they've been sitting in the Wheeler's basement, drifting between activities as they wait around for the rest of the Party to come at 6:00 for D&D.

And Will gets so close to just saying it. He even has an opening when

Mike mentions a movie that El was gonna try to rent for Valentine's Day. Some romantic comedy from a couple years ago that Will has never seen. *One Crazy Summer*. Apparently it's newly out on video. Mike has been chattering about one of the actresses in it, prompting Will to roll his eyes with a grin.

Mike throws himself back against the couch cushions dramatically, throwing a hand over his heart, and declares, "She's so *pretty* I wanna die. "

And Will laughs - and then pauses a little, taking a second glance at Mike's pink cheeks. "Really?"

Mike sits up. "Nah. I mean, the world sucks and all, but I've got shit to do before I venture into the great beyond."

"No, I mean Demi Moore."

"What do you mean? Is she really pretty? Uh, *chyeah*, she's gorgeous. You saw that trailer, it was before *Short Circuit*. Remember? Lucas pretended to throw up into his popcorn because he said it looked stupid. The guy in the dinosaur suit is like, *the movie's starting, the movie's starting!* Aw, *I'm just kiddin', I just wanted people to come running in 'cause they thought they missed* - "

"How do you remember these things?"

"S'all in the archives," Mike says, tapping the side of his head with a grin. "I can close my eyes and watch any trailer I want."

"Okay, freakshow. Not what I meant." Will shakes his head and refocuses. "I mean..."

Mike gives it a few seconds, then gets impatient and prompts, "What?"

Will fidgets, pulling his feet up underneath him. "I mean. So. You like guys."

"Yes. We've established this. And?"

"And you... also like girls?"

Will cringes, remembering how badly it went the first time he confronted Mike about his sexuality. But Mike just ducks his head a little and says, “Oh. Uh, yeah.”

“Oh.” Will had expected a little more. An explanation, maybe. Not that he owes Will any kind of explanation, it’s just not something Will really understands. He’s only ever liked guys. “But,” he says, trying to fish for more information. “Which do you like *more*?”

He sees Mike shrug in his peripheral vision. “I... Neither, I guess. Or both. I dunno.”

“But if you *had* to choose.”

Mike gives a little huff, fumbles, struggles, and finally sighs, “Fuck, I dunno, Will. It depends on the person, I guess. If I, like, *really* loved a girl and it was working out really well I guess I’d marry her. So I guess I’d be choosing girls at that point.”

Will licks his lips. “And... if you fell in love with a guy? And it was working really well?”

And Mike hesitates, then, and Will’s heart falls a little.

Of course.

Of course, that’s it. Mike likes both, but he knows there’s no real future with a guy. He can’t marry a guy. He couldn’t have kids with a guy if he wanted. He can’t move in with a guy and make a life together, not without becoming a pariah - or, at the very least, signing himself up for a life of unjust struggle and hardship. So, Will doesn’t blame Mike for -

“I guess it’d have to be a secret wedding, then,” Mike says, popping Will’s train of thought like a soap bubble, and Will blinks at him in confusion.

“A what?”

“You know, a secret wedding. Like, unofficial. Undocumented.” Mike gives a little gasp, hitting Will with the back of his hand as an idea comes to him. “Oooh, we could have it at midnight! Midnight

wedding, how badass is that? It could be lit by tiki torches or something. There could be a bonfire. We could send out coded invitations. That would be wicked.”

Will’s face feels hot. Which is really stupid. He really shouldn’t be blushing at the fact that Mike keeps saying *we*, even though Will *knows* he just means *me and a theoretical someone*, not *me and you*.

“But you couldn’t,” he says, praying that Mike hasn’t noticed his flush. “I mean. It’s illegal.”

“The *paperwork* is illegal,” Mike corrects, nose lifted haughtily as if he’s an expert on marriage law. “Not the ceremony. It’s illegal to make it official, with a license and a minister and shit. But, like, who cares? It’s just papers. Nobody goes to a wedding and is like, out of the way, love of my life, I’m here for these pieces of paper. Yes. *These* are what’s important to me. Like, what? No. That’s stupid.”

“So you’d marry a guy,” Will says, quietly, the sentence not quite a statement and not quite a question.

Mike sucks on his teeth, quiet for a moment, as if he had forgotten where this conversation started. Then he gives a cocky grin. “The Man can’t stop me, can he?”

“Government might.”

“Eh, fuck the government.”

Will grins back. There’s Mike the Rebel. There’s the disillusioned, passionate punk that showed up a year or two ago, growing his hair out and scrawling subversive quotes on school walls with sharpie and sneaking out of the house. Will hasn’t gotten to know this version of Mike as well as he knows some of the others. He hopes he will, with time. He wonders what other people Mike will be, years or decades from now.

That’s something Will has learned. Something his various traumas taught him, in a way. A person is really a collection of people. A whole cast of personalities within one human brain, developing and meshing and reverting. Changing and morphing over time. All tied

together by the core components of the person, all tied to one past and one body. Knowing someone for a long time means meeting several different iterations of them. Including yourself. Every few years, you look back and think, *Was I really that person?*

“Any way,” Mike says, “Yes, I enjoy seeing pretty girls. So I think I can survive a romantic comedy with El and Max. And Lucas, if Max can convince him to sit through it. And maybe Dustin. Whaddya say, wanna join?”

Well, shit, Will thinks, and then, *Wait, that’s what I wanted, wasn’t it? To make plans with Mike so he wouldn’t be alone?*

But when he thought about making plans, he had kind of been picturing the two of them. *Just* the two of them. He’s surprised how loathe he is to give up that idea.

He chews on his lip, and then says, “Actually...”

Mike turns, his interest piqued. “Oh?” His eyes are suddenly alight with mischief. “William Byers, do you have *plans* already? On Valentine’s Day?” He crawls a little closer with a shit-eating grin. “Do you have a *date*?”

Will’s eyes widen. “No, no, no -”

“You do!” Mike accuses, poking a finger into his chest. “You’re *red!* ”

“No,” Will insists, laughing because he’s flustered, shoving Mike away. “I’m red because you’re embarrassing me, dickhead. Fuck off. No, I do not have a date.”

Mike sits back, eyes narrowed, appearing to debate the legitimacy of the claim. “Well, then,” he drawls, teasing, “Why can’t you hang out on Sunday? Hm?”

“I *can*, I just -” Will reaches up to rub at the back of his neck, face burning even hotter now. “I kinda thought *we* would hang out.” He peers at Mike to see if he’s getting it, then looks away again when Mike’s confused, furrowed brows are just too adorable to look at. He flicks a hand back and forth, linking them with an invisible thread. “Like. Us.”

He doesn't look back up, so he doesn't know what expressions are playing across Mike's face, but when Mike speaks again it's in a tone that's soft, surprised, and almost... tender.

"Oh." There's a moment of silence, and then Mike bumps their arms together. "Yeah, sure. Sounds great. I'll, uh. I can steal some of my mom's wine, probably. And." When Will finally looks back, Mike is peering up at him from under the rumpled fringe of his bangs. "Maybe a movie?"

A relieved smile breaks through Will's nerves. "Sounds great."

Notes for the Chapter:

So like, for real this time, one more chapter left. Lol.
As always, I love hearing any and all of your thoughts! :D

10. More Than Friends

“Wanna hear a horror story in ten words or less?”

Will swaps the phone to his other ear, hitching his shoulder up to pin it in place. It's his night of the week to cook - a tradition that began once Jonathan started going to college and couldn't fill in for Joyce's late work days anymore - and he's trying to stir spaghetti sauce with the phone cord stretched all the way across the kitchen. “Hit me.”

“My mother packed something red and lacy.”

“*Michael*,” Will groans, squeezing his eyes shut. He'd scrub at his eyes if he wasn't trying to juggle the phone, the handle of the saucepan and a wooden spoon all at once. “Why did you tell me that? Why do you *know* that?”

“I went to ask her a question while she was packing, okay? If I have to have that information in my brain, so do you. And it -”

“*Winding your way down on Baker Street*,” Will hollers, badly singing the first song that comes to mind just to drown out whatever else Mike might have said - and to expunge that image from his mind. “*Light in your head and dead on your feet* -”

Mike tries and fails to imitate the sax riff even though it's not the right place in the song for that. By the sounds of it, he has his lips pressed together and his cheeks puffed out, and he sounds more like a dying elephant than a saxophone. Will almost drops the phone into the spaghetti sauce laughing.

“*Well, another crazy day*,” he soldiers on through gasps of laughter, “*You'll drink the night away, and forget about everything* - oh, hey, did you get the wine?”

“I mean, it's not going anywhere.”

“Well, but, is that still part of the plan though?”

“Oh, yeah. They have a whole collection going down there, we basically have our pick. They're not gonna notice if one goes missing.”

Mysteriously. What is it with middle aged middle class people and wanting to have wine collections? Like, what's the point of having a collection? Is it just in case you have an unexpected massive party and need enough booze for fifty people?"

"I dunno. Why does anyone collect anything?"

"I guess. You collect bottle caps, that's pretty useless."

"Wow, okay. You know, I had a *The Hobbit* joke about unexpected parties, but now you insulted my jar of pointless bottle caps, so you don't get it. *Ow, shit.*"

"You okay?"

"Yeah, the sauce just bubbled and spit boiling hot tomato juice on me. Hold on."

Will maneuvers the phone onto the counter, leaving it there to grab a dish towel and check the recipe on the side of the spaghetti box.

He also may be just the tiniest bit flustered at the moment, and needs a second to collect himself. Not that he'd admit that.

It's Saturday. Tomorrow is Valentine's Day, when he and Mike are supposed to have their get-together. And Mike just called to let him know that they'll have the house to themselves.

For the whole night.

Apparently Ted won a raffle in his office, earning himself and his wife a couple's weekend away on company money. They're out of town for two nights, and Holly is staying with their aunt. As Mike cheerfully concluded, "*We get to use the big TV in the living room. Sweet, right?*"

So, basically, Will has unintentionally signed himself up to spend a night alone in a big house on Valentine's Day with his best friend and longtime crush, who oh by the way has been single for weeks now. And who is queer. And who knows Will is queer. And who knows Will is attracted to him, and who has *explicitly stated that he liked Will back* at some point in the past. And who once kissed Will in the AV

Room until Will's brain turned to putty.

And Will is fucked. Because some stupid little flicker of thought in the back of his brain is whispering, *Maybe. Maybe there's a chance. Maybe he still likes you. Maybe this is your chance. Maybe he'd want to -*

Will tells that little voice to shut up and stop being stupid. It doesn't work very well. It's been getting more persistent, lately. Making him think stupid things and have stupid ideas that he shies away from automatically, trained by years and years of habit. *Don't do that. Don't think that. Don't get your hopes up. It's not fair to you, and it's not fair to him.*

But the thing is... considering what he knows now - about Mike, about himself, about *them* - those stupid ideas are looking less and less impossible. And it's awful, starting to hope like that, because he knows he's just setting himself up for a second heartbreak.

Oh, *and* Mike just brought up the idea of Valentine's Day sex - albeit by way of a less-than-arousing subject. Will shudders again and summarily banishes that image from his mind.

Which was a *very* bad idea, because with that out of his head, suddenly the empty space fills with images of someone else. He's remembering that kiss, all at once, the feeling of Mike's lips slotted together with his, and he's remembering Mike's hard breathing at the other end of a phone line and he has to focus hard on the pasta box to redirect his thoughts.

For a more authentic al-dente taste...

Will goes back to the phone. "*Meep meep*," he says in greeting, and Mike *meeps* back at him in acknowledgement. "So, what time did we wanna meet tomorrow?"

They met at 1:00pm, and the day has been a punch-drunk blur of laughter and sugar-overdose ever since.

Will brought over *Castlevania*, which they played on Mike's NES for a solid two and a half hours. They made cookies, blasting Will's

mixtapes on the Wheelers' fancy stereo system as they both told each other not to eat raw cookie dough and then did it anyway. Mike pretended to vomit and die from salmonella poisoning. Will did not find it funny. They had some vague thoughts about building a fort, but then Mike wanted to walk to the drugstore and buy snacks instead. They stopped by the video store, rented *Dune* and *WarGames* - although *E.T.*, *The Thing*, and *Grease* were all close runners-up - then went home and pilfered the fridge for dinner.

And now, as they argue about which movie to watch first, they trip down the basement stairs to the high shelf where Ted and Karen keep their wine selection.

The problem: they don't know what any of the names mean. They don't exactly label wine with big stickers that say *DRY* or *TART* or *THIS ONE'S BUBBLY*. But, by some miracle, Will spots the word *sweet* on a bottle of red, so they grab that one and hope it's what they were looking for.

Mike fishes down actual wine glasses from a high cabinet in the kitchen, loudly asserting that they can't drink *wine* from *water cups*, while Will struggles to twist the corkscrew into the cork.

They settle on the floor of the living room, surrounded by two sleeping bags, pillows, popcorn, sour gummy worms, Runts, Twizzlers, and peanut butter M&Ms (Mike got a little carried away at the drugstore). A game of rock-paper-scissors decides the debate for them: *WarGames* first.

And Will leans back against the couch, taking a cautious sip of the wine while Mike loads up the VHS, and thinks to himself, *This is fine. This is good.* He's been doing good. Considering the remarkable temptation of the situation he's in, he's been *very* good. He never once tried to hold Mike's hand, even though he knows Mike would allow it with little question now that they're out to each other. He didn't get overly cuddly while they were playing video games or standing next to each other in the kitchen, stirring cookie dough, flicking each other with flour. He hasn't even brought up the breakup or said, *How've you been doing with all that?*, even though he wants to. He doesn't know a non-assholish way of saying, *So, are you over him yet?*, especially when what he really wants to say is, *For the first time*

ever I think I might actually have a chance with you, maybe, and it scares the shit out of me.

And now, the final test. Lights off. TV on. Dim lighting, alcohol on his tongue, Mike sinking down next to him on the floor close enough for their arms to touch. Alone in the empty house, curtains drawn against the early dark of winter, blood already buzzing with a sugar-high.

Will typically isn't a fan of alcohol. The beer that Lucas sometimes procures for the party just tastes gross to him. He'll muscle down a can just to be sociable, and so that Max doesn't call him a baby, but he'd honestly rather drink pickle juice. He likes wine a little better, though - at least, *this* wine. This wine is sweet and slightly bubbly, fizzing a little on his tongue. The wine he remembers being offered at his cousins' New Year's party was dry and tart and made him want to retch. But this wine is pretty okay.

I'm not gonna do it, Will tells the voice that keeps trying to convince him to reach over and take Mike's hand - or just push him down onto his back and kiss him breathless like he's wanted to since the night of the breakup. *I won't*.

Too risky, too terror-inducing, too... too... He doesn't know. Maybe he's just too stuck in the ruts of his own inertia, a decade's worth of habit and paranoia keeping him from straying too close to that course of action.

So he stuffs a pillow behind him to lean against, and he sips his wine, and he watches the movie.

He's caught off guard - and yet, in a way, unsurprised - when it's *Mike* who sets his wine glass aside, turns to look at Will, and glances down at his lips when Will looks back.

Strangely, Will's reflexive first thought is, *Oh, now? Here?*

Then reality catches up to him, scattering the momentary fog of unprepared blankness, and his guts tie themselves up in a tight and complicated knot. Electricity rushes through his fingers and throat. His pulse picks up in an instant. For half a second, as Mike seems to

second-guess himself, drawing back a centimeter to wet his lips with averted eyes, Will wonders if he should allow this. It didn't go so well last time. But circumstances are different now, aren't they? Why shouldn't he allow it, other than the fact that he wants so much more than a kiss, and he's too scared to ask for it?

Because I want him to be my boyfriend, not just my makeout buddy, Will answers himself. Because I don't know if he wants that, and the idea of asking is terrifying. Because I know it's going to hurt if we do this and then he doesn't want the rest of me.

But then Mike's eyes flicker up again, gauging Will's reaction, and Will puts down his own glass on the carpet somewhere, and the snowball is already rolling. No stopping it now. Will shifts forward, just a degree, and the tiny gesture of permission seems to return Mike's bravery to him full-force. He closes the last distance between them, surer and steadier than Will could ever hope to be, and Will barely manages to swallow back a clipped sound of contentment as he finally gets what he's wanted for weeks. Months. Years.

He lets himself drift, empty-headed, just enjoying the moment for three, five, ten seconds. Mike tastes like sour gummy worms and Twizzlers and wine, which makes Will want to lick into his mouth. It's the taste of countless sleepovers, countless afternoons spent at the movies, innumerable memories of wasting away the hours together laughing their asses off - plus the wine, a little stale on Mike's tongue, which adds a whole new little thrill to it.

And then Will does the responsible thing, the right thing. He heeds the niggling little warning at the back of his mind and forces himself to pull back, even when Mike grips his shoulders and gives a whine of protest.

"No," Will whispers, "Mike -"

"Why not?" Mike counters, trying to pull him back in. He smells like popcorn and wine and like himself, like *Mike*, manmade scents wearing away at the end of the day and just leaving *him*. Skin and sweat and rumpled clothes. His hands are solid and shaky and *real* where they rest against Will's shoulders, like the kind of thing Will used to daydream about before he decided he needed to get over his

best friend for good.

And that worked out great, didn't it?

Mike tugs again, and Will holds firm, trying to explain before his resolve crumples. "No, hey." He leans back a little and Mike's face falls into a confused, hurt pout. Will reaches up to press one hand over Mike's in an attempt to lessen the sting. He doesn't think it works. "I'm not him," he says, as gently as he can, trying to also say, *I understand, and I'm not upset with you for looking for comfort like this. Hell, I've done it before too. But* - "I'm not... I don't want to be a stand-in for Emmett. I'm not him."

Will lets his hand slide off of Mike's, but Mike doesn't move his hands from Will's shoulders. He seems frozen, just staring.

Then he snorts, head dropping to swing side-to-side. "No, Emmett wasn't *you*." But then, before Will can even begin to process that, Mike flinches as suddenly as if he was stung, letting his hands fall away and tucking them into his lap. His face is turned away. "Unless you don't... I'm sorry, I thought..." He lifts a hand to rub the back of his neck, still not looking at Will, and gives a forced little laugh. "Shit, that's awkward. Uh, I'll -"

"No," Will blurts, "No, no, I want to -" *You have no idea how much I want to.* "- I just. I dunno. I dunno if I can just be your makeout buddy on weekends and then walk away again like nothing ever happened."

Like last time.

"Oh," Mike says, but he still looks confused.

So Will sighs, hikes his shoulders up to his ears, and pretends to look back at the TV screen as he says, "I just feel like that would... make me sad. Or, like, it wouldn't feel good. Wouldn't feel *right*. You know."

There's a moment of quiet where the movie keeps playing, sending shifting, colorful light across the room. Neither of them have been paying attention to it. Onscreen, Ferris-Bueller-with-a-different-

haircut huddles over a computer while an actress Will doesn't recognize continues to be thoroughly impressed by technology. Then Mike's lips part - Will can hear it, he can hear the little intake of breath and the subsequent pause.

"How d'you mean?"

Will's knees pull up to his chest. He wants to fidget with something, so he finds his wine glass again and swirls it, watching the liquid. "Well - you know," he sighs again, getting a little grumpy because this is so hard. But Mike doesn't know, and Will has to square his shoulders and force the words out once and for all. "I just really like you. And I don't wanna make out with you if I can't actually... date you. I just think it would make me feel kinda like shit." He lifts one shoulder in an awkward shrug. "... sorry."

He takes a big sip from the glass just to have something to do, forgetting that it's alcohol, and fights off a grimace. By the time he manages to swallow, keeping his face impassive despite the compulsion to stick out his tongue and shudder at the unfamiliar burn, Mike still hasn't made a sound. It's making him increasingly nervous. Mike is right, this *is* awkward. It's awful. This is why Will knew he shouldn't have kissed him again, it just brings up topics that are unbearably uncomfortable to -

"You still like me?"

Will twists his head around to give Mike an incredulous, *are-you-kidding-me* look. "Yes, you moron, I still like you. It's only been..."

Well, okay, he supposes it has been a couple months since Will's confession. Since the first time they kissed. But two months isn't *that* long.

Mike mouths a few times, eventually settling on, "... oh. I kinda figured you'd have moved on by now, honestly."

A smile pulls up Will's lips without his conscious intent, surprising him and confusing Mike. He shakes his head, takes another throat-warming sip of the wine, and sets it aside with a dry little laugh. "I tried to," he says to the floor. "I almost did. Six months ago, I

thought... yay, me. You know? I did it. I got over a childhood crush, and now I could finally -"

Sharp motion in his peripheral vision. When he looks up, Mike's brow has furrowed and his hands are thrown up in a T - *time out*. "Whoa," he's saying, "Whoa, wait. Childhood crush?"

Will smirks, a little perplexed - who else would he be talking about? - and smacks him gently. "*You, dummy.*"

Mike's jaw drops. It would be funny if the conversation wasn't so vulnerable and borderline-anxiety-inducing. "You.... me?" He says, his capacity for intelligent speech apparently wiped out entirely. He reboots with a shake of the head. "I mean - you - you - how long have you -?"

Oh.

Will looks away again, embarrassed. Admitting that he wished Mike had chosen him instead of Emmett is one thing. Admitting he's been daydreaming about getting a dog and decorating an apartment together, building a life together, since he was *five*... That's quite another. That's twelve years of clandestine observations and yearning and fantasizing about kisses, and suddenly Will is afraid that he's exposed himself as a weirdo, an obsessed freak, something off-putting or maybe even dangerous, and he finds himself going quiet and shamefaced. Wondering how Mike is ever going to trust him again now that he knows Will has been pining over him behind his back for *twelve years*, like a total creep.

Of course, the vast majority of those years were completely innocent - well, as innocent as any queer tendencies can be, he supposes. He knows people that would argue even his most uncomplicated and chaste desires to be twisted and amoral simply by virtue of existence. But, holding hands. Hugs. Cuddling. Doing things together. Maybe, sometimes, a shy kiss. These were the types of things Will daydreamed about and yearned for up until only a few years ago. These are things he *still* yearns for.

Surely he can be forgiven for that? Surely he can't have done too much damage with his innocent, naive childhood fantasies about

being pirates on a pirate ship together or just one sweet, close-lipped kiss in the moonlight. Surely he can be forgiven for those, despite how embarrassingly, inappropriately long he harbored that secret.

Can't he? Or is that too much?

Yeah, Mike had a boyfriend. He's a self-proclaimed queer and he liked (likes?) Will and maybe he even wants Will. All right. But what Will just said crossed some sort of boundary. Mike's reaction made that clear.

Twelve years? Ten years, five years even? Something held over from childhood itself? That borders on devotion. And maybe that's too much.

"Since we were little, I guess," he mumbles at last.

"That's... wow."

Mike's eyes are big, full of something, and Will's stomach twists another knot tighter.

"I know. I'm sorry." I know it's weird. I know it could be unhealthy, if I let it be. Fixating like that. And maybe it was, once. But I've worked on it. I almost got over you, last year. I had that therapist, for a while after the upside down, and I thought about other things and other people. Hell, I made out with other people. I know not to hang everything on you, now. I swear I'm not as unbalanced as I just made myself sound.

"Sorry? For what?"

"I don't know. It's weird. We were friends, we were *kids*, and I..." Will pulls his hands down his face, giving up, and when he emerges Mike is looking at him steadily, earnestly.

"It's not weird."

"Yeah, it is," Will says automatically, the judgement too deeply entrenched in his mind to refute.

"Well, I guess we're both weird, then."

Will considers this, face softening despite himself, and gives a little snort. "Yeah. I guess. That's different, though, I mean - I liked you before I even knew I liked *boys*. "

His face is hot, saying that. He means both, *That's weird, isn't it?* and *Please tell me you don't think that's weird*, at once.

Mike tilts his head, expression thoughtful. "You've got me beat, I think. I've liked you since middle school."

Will's head snaps around, but Mike isn't paying attention. He's frowning up at the photos on the wall, nose scrunched as he does some internal calculation.

"Maybe sooner. Probably sooner. But, seventh grade, for sure." He picks at the carpet below him and his voice drops. "Still do, I guess. I tried not to, same as you, but..." He gives a little laugh, glancing at Will for just a moment as if checking his expression, nerves written all over his face. "I guess old habits die hard, huh?"

Will gapes. "Bull."

"Really."

"Bull." Will shifts, turning towards Mike. His mouth feels dry. Is that the wine? Or is it just whatever chemicals his brain is pouring into his bloodstream? "That's. No. What?"

Mike just shrugs. "I mean, I didn't *know* I liked you until later, but... yeah."

Seventh grade. Shit. Mike said he'd liked Will for a long time, that day in the AV Room, but Will thought he meant maybe a year or two. Not *five*.

Still do, I guess.

Does he really mean -?

Is he saying he wants -?

For an odd moment, Will wonders if there's another world out there,

another universe perhaps accessed through its own doors in the Upside Down, where they had this conversation sooner. Before Emmett. Hell, before high school. Before the Mind Flayer. Is there a world out there where they've already been boyfriends for four years? Did they hold hands that night on Halloween like Will wanted to? Did they go to the Snow Ball together?

Boyfriends.

God.

Is that what...?

Well. No way to tell unless he asks. He's made it this far.

"We should probably do something about that, then," Will says, in his best attempt at nonchalance.

Mike's lips quirk up. "You think?"

Uh oh. Too much? Too soon post-breakup? Did he misinterpret?

"If you want. Maybe it's - is it too soon after, uh...?"

Mike's eyes go wide. "No, no, no, it's - I would - yeah. For sure."

"It's you would yeah," Will echoes back. "Fantastic. Somebody get a pen."

"Shut up."

"It's I would yeah.' Michael Wheeler, nineteen eighty eight."

"Shut *up*. I don't even wanna date you anymore."

Will can't hold back his smile anymore. "So you do want to date me."

When he glances over for confirmation, Mike just smiles at the ground and says simply, "Yeah."

His heart leaps. Stupid-happy. Movie-happy. Balloons and sparklers. Soaring upwards. Golden warmth. "Cool."

“Cool.” They both nod sagely for a moment. Mike scoots an inch closer, mouth twisting in a half-joking smile. “Can we keep kissing now?”

“Yeah,” Will chuckles, and Mike, through a nose-crinkling grin and a deep blush, says, “That was a lot easier than all the... talking. Stuff.”

“Mm.”

They don't kiss. Or, rather, they do. But what happens in the next few minutes can't possibly be defined by the single, simple word *kiss*. It's so much more. It's kissing, and it's touching, and it's Mike crawling into Will's lap and nearly knocking over a wine glass onto the carpet, breathing hard, fingers tangled in fabric. Mike's scent, the hitch of his breath, his warmth and weight on Will's hips and thighs, his hands in Will's hair. It's so much more than Will has ever had at once, so much that he's drowning in it, and he gladly drowns.

It's like a floodgate has opened. They've both been holding back for so long, and now that they're here and they can do this... It's like every repressed desire, every bit of want and affection that they've been denying and quashing, it's all coming out now. Now they're here, now it's happening and they can do this, they're *allowed* to do this, and it's like they couldn't keep their hands off each other if they tried. They're trying to drink each other in, breathe each other in, get as much physical contact as possible before this gets taken away. They're hurried and sloppy, almost frenzied, quick quick get the shirts off, press together again, mouths sealed together again with a moan, start grinding together at last before this all disappears. Will is hard in his pants before he even realizes it, lightheaded as the blood rushes south, and he shoves up against Mike instinctually, open-mouthed. Mike makes a rough noise and swivels his hips down in turn, and pleasure blooms warm and sweet in Will's lower abdomen. He swipes his tongue into Mike's mouth, chasing the hot-slick touch of Mike's tongue. He still tastes like sour candy and wine.

This is a good thing, a rare boon from the universe, and, well, queers like them have to grab good things quick before they're gone.

They dry-hump against the couch, movie forgotten entirely, clutching and grasping at each other's shoulders, heads, hips. Will braces his

palms under the seat of Mike's jeans without thinking about it, using his grip to guide Mike's jerky movements, and Mike twitches hard in Will's lap and blows out an unsteady breath. One side of Will's mouth curls up. *Oh*, he thinks, devious intention rising up in him out of nowhere, *You like that*. He readjusts his grip, squeezing Mike's ass on purpose this time, and Mike gives a ticklish little jump and a moan.

"Will," he huffs, and Will's skin erupts with goosebumps.

God, if he could hear Mike say his name like that every day for the rest of his life...

Mike laces his fingers into Will's hair and rolls his hips against Will's another few times, making Will groan. Mike's voice is hoarse when he says, "Do you want to...?"

Will nods, immediately and enthusiastically. Yes. Oh, god yes. He's been waiting for this since October. No, he's been waiting for this far longer than that. But October is a good place to start.

Mike isn't accepting the nod on its own, so Will gasps, "Yeah. I want to."

"Want to... what?" Mike says, and Will frowns in confusion.

"Huh? You asked me." Mike ducks his head, a little redder than before, and Will slows, curious. "What?"

"I mean." Mike finds a very interesting spot on the wall, somewhere over Will's shoulder. "D'you wanna have sex, or...?"

The breath freezes in Will's lungs.

Ho. Ly. Shit.

"Or we could just - other things," Mike is hurrying to say. "Or nothing. I mean, we don't have to do anything, I'd love to just watch the movie and cuddle, if you want, but -"

"Are you kidding?" Will rears up, heart hammering, and collides with Mike's mouth a bit harder than he intended. He pulls back just far enough to laugh, "You're gonna say that and then suggest *not* having

sex? You are ridiculous.” The last sentence is mumbled against Mike’s mouth, and he feels Mike smile against him.

“Mmkay,” Mike mumbles back. “So... yeah?”

“Yeah. Yes. Please.”

Mike fumbles his words for a moment, flustered. “Okay.” He laughs - nervous, maybe. “Great. I’ll - I have lube upstairs, I’ll go - one second.”

“Kay,” Will nervous-laughes in return, and then real-laughes at the speed at which Mike disappears and ascends the stairs.

Holy shit. Hooooo-ly shit. This is happening. He can’t believe this is happening. He feels like ants are running around under his skin. His whole body is crawling with energy. He can’t sit still.

He hears the upstairs bathroom door close. Right, yeah. He should probably do that, too. How awkward would that be? *I know we’re kind of in the middle of something, but I’ll be back in a second, gotta pee. Hold that thought!*

He uses the guest bath, taking the time to breathe and ground himself in the familiar scent of the Wheelers’ cranberry-scented soap and the heat of the tap water. His shirt is still crumpled somewhere on the floor of the living room, and the cool air makes the hair raise on his arms. He half-expects that the whole thing will be gone by the time he gets back. Mike will be sitting on the ground, watching the movie, and the whole conversation will have never happened. But when he rounds the corner to the living room, Mike is only just coming down the stairs, a plastic bottle in his hand and a timid grin on his face.

“Still want to?”

“Get over here,” Will says in response, giggling when Mike bounds across the room like an excitable puppy and crushes him into an embrace, kissing him gracelessly. The hard plastic of the bottle of lube presses into Will’s hip where Mike is holding him, and he shivers.

It all happens so fast. Mike knows what he’s doing, and Will is so

swept up in it that he barely registers how much time has passed. They end up on the couch somehow. One moment Will has pants, and the next he doesn't, and then he feels himself hook his thumbs into the waistband of his boxers and shove them off too. Time blurs again as his senses are taken over by Mike's hot skin against his and their lips working together and then - he's dead, he must be dead - Mike's hand around his dick, working him slowly as Will's head strains back against the couch cushion. The only thing keeping him from a premature finish is the gnawing awareness of his own inexperience, making him anxious that he'll mess it up somehow.

But Mike is so gentle that it's hard to be anxious. He checks in constantly: when he crawls up to drag a hot, slick tongue over one pebbled nipple before drawing it into his mouth and sucking, making Will arch and thrash. When he moves down again and takes Will in his mouth. When he reaches around and, with Will's shaky nod of permission, begins gently working him open.

Will is far gone already. Pliant in Mike's arms, gasping and shuddering and whimpering as Mike gently works him open and begins stroking one finger in and out, then two, then thrusting, and all at once Mike is shifting angles and crooking his fingers inside Will, looking for something.

Will knows what he's looking for. He's found it himself, a time or two. His muscles tense in anticipation until Mike suddenly presses down on a spot within him that has Will's whole abdomen going taut, stomach caving in as his whole body clamps down on Mike's fingers. A weak, reedy sound is pressed from his lungs as an unbearable spike of deep, rich, hot pleasure resonates through him, concentrated at that inexplicable bundle of nerves - and, fucking shit, it's so much better when it's someone else's fingers. He knew it was good - good enough that he was mortified by it, almost superstitiously scared of it, every one of the few times he's done this to himself. Like he was damning himself just a little more every time he gave in and indulged in it. But he never knew it could be *this* good. He didn't know that it could feel like this, his entire abdomen clamping down, the sole of one foot cramping as his toes literally curl, the pleasure hot and alive like molten lava splashing around in the cradle of his hips, in the meat of his thighs, up his spine.

And then Mike does it again, and again, the pads of his fingers spiking into the soft spot mercilessly, reducing Will to a gasping, writhing, sobbing, unintelligible mess.

He has to kick Mike away unceremoniously, panting, “God. Stop. Stop.”

“Are you okay?” Mike says immediately, and Will nods against the couch cushion. He can tell his hair is a wild mess around his head.

“Yeah, I was just about to... you know.” Even after all that, he still can’t say it while looking Mike in the face.

Mike has a sly little smile plastered on his face. He kisses the inside of Will’s thigh. “Isn’t that the point?”

“Not yet,” Will insists, pleads, then reaches for Mike’s hand and tugs him up. “C’mere. I’ve barely gotten to do anything for you yet.”

Mike bats his free hand dismissively, but lets Will pull him up the couch. “I’m fine.”

Will frowns a little, murmuring into Mike’s mouth as he moves in for a kiss. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

“I’m *fine*,” Mike persists. He melts into another kiss. “Wanna make *you* feel good.”

As if to underscore his point, he reaches between them, and Will jolts at the foreign feeling of someone else’s fingers sinking into him again.

Mike draws back a little at the jump, a pensive scrunch forming between his brows. He gazes down at Will, and when Will tilts his head in question, he says, “You’ve done this before right?”

He pumps his fingers in and out, slowly, as if to demonstrate what he means, and Will tries hard not to squirm.

“Like on my own or with another person?”

The look of suspicion on Mike’s face deepens. “Both, I guess.”

"I've, uh. Done it to myself a few times."

Mike's fingers go still. He blinks. "... wait, you've never..."

Will can't answer without stammering, so he just breaks eye contact, forcing Mike to finish his sentence.

"You've never done this with anybody?"

Will slowly shakes his head.

Mike is a statue. After a moment he unfreezes, breathing out, "Jesus. I didn't know - why didn't you say something? I would've been more careful."

"You've been careful."

"Yeah, but I would've... I mean, shit, I thought... You've never had sex?"

"How many times are you gonna make me say it?"

"Well I just thought you'd already done it with -"

"Yes, I'm a virgin, all right? You caught me. Is that an issue?"

"It might be, actually."

Will feels something in his chest go cold, even with Mike lying over him radiating body heat. "What? Why?"

"It's just a lot for your first time. Maybe we should -"

"Mike, it'll be fine," he snaps, and he didn't mean to snap. It's just, he's determined to do this. To prove that he can be better than Emmett, that he's good, that he's worthy, that Mike is *his*.

He has this horrible, unfounded feeling that he's always just going to be *the second one*. He'll never be what Emmett was. He'll never be Emmett. No matter what, whenever they're intimate - if this ever happens again - he'll always just be Emmett's replacement. And worse than that, he'll never be as good as the original. Because he

doesn't *know* this stuff. Emmett knew this stuff. Emmett was with someone before Mike. Emmett was experienced. What little Will knows is limited to what he's been able to pick up from common knowledge, jokes, context clues, a single straight porn magazine that Jonathan didn't hide well enough, and - just once - a semi-explicit gay pulp romance novel that Will found in the twenty-five-cent bin at the back of a used bookstore when he was fifteen. He wasn't anywhere near brave enough to actually go up and buy it, and not bold enough to steal it. So he just stood in the back corner of the store, scanning through the pages, chucking the book back into the bin in a panic every time he heard a rustle or floorboard squeak. It gave him some good material for the spank bank, but wasn't exactly very instructional.

And then there's Emmett, who arrived in Hawkins already knowing just how to get a guy off, and then had *months* to learn what Mike liked. How is Will supposed to compare to that? It's not fair.

Mike chews on the inside of his lip. "I really think I should bottom."

"What?"

"Like, *you* should fuck *me*."

Hearing Mike say it, matter-of-fact like that, makes Will's dick twitch against Mike's thigh. So, he does still want to have sex. Just in a different way. Will lets out a breath of relief, then nods assent.

But Will can tell, almost immediately, that this isn't going to work. Mike is tense from the get-go, muscles tightening, uncharacteristically tight-lipped and anxious as he spreads an open sleeping bag on the floor and lies down in the center. He tries to coax Will to work him open, then starts to do it himself when Will hesitates, and Will grabs his arm to stop him. He's perched between Mike's knees, frowning down at Mike's dark - and apprehensive - eyes.

Something is wrong. This is wrong. He's clearly massively uncomfortable and trying to hide it, and Will is not about to allow that to happen.

"Are you okay?"

Mike's answering chirp is about as convincing as a plastic mask from the dollar store. "Yeah!"

"You sure?"

"I'm good." Mike must see that Will doesn't buy it, because he shifts and looks up at the ceiling to say, "It's always a little - difficult, at first. Keep going, I just need to shake off some nerves. Will you help me out?"

He tries to smile enticingly, but the aforementioned nerves are as clear as day in his face.

Will looks down at him for a moment, and then echoes back to Mike what Mike said to him once: "I mean, if you're nervous about it you probably shouldn't."

Mike frowns, sitting halfway up. "No, I want to! I really want you, Will. Really." He pulls Will into a kiss, getting up on his knees to roll his hard-on against Will's stomach in demonstration. "I wanna do this with you. Please."

Will thinks it over, running his tongue along the backs of his teeth. He's blushing again, for the millionth time, before he even gets the words out. "Well, what if we did it the other way around?"

"Like change position?" Mike seems relieved. "Yeah, sure, how do you wanna -?"

"No, I - I asked if you'd..." Will goes even redder, chin dipping as inexperienced shyness floods him again, and then manages to say, "...fuck me. I asked you first, if you remember. And I... I think we should do it like that. If you want."

"I dunno." Mike tilts his head - thoughtful, this time, not just concerned. "That's a lot if you've never done it before. It might hurt. Like a... Like a pinch, or a bruise, way deep in there."

He's trying to dissuade him, and Will won't have it.

"I'll be fine, I've done it with my fingers before. And you already got me ready."

“It’s different.”

“We’ll just go slow, right? Mikey. Hey. We can stop if it’s not working.”

Mike nods sideways, slowly. Then he nods up-and-down. And then, finally, he says, “Okay. Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Totally.” Will hesitates, then blurts, “Wouldn’t you get shit on your dick though? I’ve, uh. Always wondered.”

Mike bursts into laughter. Because he still has the sense of humor of a twelve year old, apparently - although, at least it seems to be dissolving away the last of his nerves. “I mean, kind of, sometimes. A little. If you don’t prep beforehand.” He shrugs. “Fact of life. A condom helps though. Oh, we should use one of those anyway.”

Will nervous-laughs, waiting for Mike to crack a smile and say, *Kidding*. Then, when he doesn’t, the smile falls from Will’s face. “You’re serious?”

“Sounds worse than it is.”

“Okay,” Will says, not sure whether to burst out laughing again or throw his hands up, walk out the front door and declare celibacy.

“Grab my jeans?”

Will does, fishing them off the back of the couch, and Mike digs in a pocket for a little foil package. Apparently lube wasn’t the only thing he grabbed while he was upstairs.

Mike can’t say he’s not relieved. He had been nervous, in some stupid way, about getting fucked again. It was always such a toss-up with Emmett. He was so seldom able to just let go and enjoy it, always battling his own body, straining to focus on the pleasure rather than the pressure. And what if that happened with Will? Mike can endure it, no problem, but what if Will noticed and felt bad? He couldn’t face that scenario, and the more he tried not to worry about it, the more he worried about it. Until Will noticed anyway.

And now, Will has offered himself up, instead. And Mike was hesitant. He didn't want that same kind of struggle for Will. He'd rather endure it himself and let Will have the more pleasurable role. This is about Will, after all. He decided that the moment they agreed to sex. But Will noticed that he was tensing up, damn him, and now he's being stubborn. And Mike knows from over twelve years of experience that once Will has decided to do something, you will have a very hard time changing his mind. So, finally, Mike agreed.

And anyway... he'd be lying if he said the idea didn't entice him. He's never actually been on top before. The idea gets him far more horny than he'd care to admit.

So, with that decided, Mike returns to working at Will with his fingers. Thoroughly, methodically prepping him, even when Will says he's ready, and even five minutes after that. Mike pumps him slowly with one hand to keep him aroused, using the constant low-level wash of pleasure to distract him and carry him through the potentially uncomfortable, stressful process of opening up and stretching and relaxing the muscles that want nothing more than to clench and tighten.

But Will, to Mike's relief, doesn't seem stressed about it at all. Uncertain, maybe, and a little nervous, always glancing up at Mike for cues, never sure if he's doing all right even when Mike assures him over and over that he is. The trust in those hazel eyes, with their lids heavy and their pupils blown, makes the breath disappear right out of Mike's lungs. His fingers are sliding in and out of Will, feeling the impossible buttery-softness of his flesh, the incredible heat of him, and Will is sighing and shifting and gazing at Mike with those lust-darkened, trusting eyes, murmuring his name like a prayer, like Mike is the one deserving of worship here instead of Will. Mike doubles over with a hard surge of lust and love and affection, needing as much of their skin to touch as possible.

And finally, the fourth time that Will says, "Mike, I'm *ready*," he leans down to kiss the tip of Will's nose and says, "Okay."

They start face-to-face, with Will perched on top of Mike's hips - which throws Will off. He never really expected it like this; this isn't

following the script of his fantasies or expectations. But it is good. It's difficult, and slow, and, yes, a little uncomfortable. And good. Mike lets him set the pace as he lowers himself down, knees braced on the sleeping bag on either side of Mike's torso. The process is stop-and-go, with a false start or two, and Will starts to worry that he's bad at this already. But then, all at once, he's all the way down. Breathing long, hard breaths, congratulating himself. Mike is stroking his sides and back and face, murmuring to him, breathing pretty heavily himself.

And then, after a minute or so of quiet adjustment punctuated by kisses, they start to move. Slowly. It's very slow, at first, and sweet, and almost sleepy. And that's good, too. Will's erection flagged during the process of penetration, and thank fuck for that, because it was starting to get downright painful. Now, as he rolls his hips on Mike's lap, just breathing softly with his eyes closed, he can feel his dick start to stiffen again. Mike sees it, or maybe just senses the shift in tides, and he wraps his big hands around Will's hips and whispers, "There we go."

And Will realizes, belatedly, *We're having sex.*

He grins down at Mike, sudden and involuntary. Mike grins back.

It's not perfect. They lose their rhythm a few times because they're not practiced at being in sync, and Will's knees keep slipping on the blanket where he's trying to hold himself up. It's a problem he never expected to encounter, never even knew to worry about, and he gives a flustered little laugh the fourth time he has to re-adjust himself.

And Will is starting to tire.

He's a little embarrassed about how quickly his muscles are fatigued from this particular action, even at this languid pace - how his thigh and calf muscles are starting to burn with lactic acid, how the muscles in his abdomen are starting to ache from the effort of ceaselessly, steadily lifting himself up and lowering himself back down onto Mike's dick, how clearly he's unpracticed and untested here. He tries to fight through it, distracting himself with the increasingly gentler sting and ache of Mike splitting him open. It pries him apart in a way that wraps tightly around his instinctual

brainstem, making him want to slam himself down on the hot, thick object that's invading him, making him want to bounce hard in Mike's lap in a way that's completely undignified, despite the sting of pain. But he's still very much adjusting and he knows he wouldn't be able to do that, not now, not yet, and especially because he's beginning to slow despite himself.

Mike notices that too. Of course he does. He smooths his hands up Will's sides to get his attention. "You okay?"

"Sorry," Will says, flashing an automatic grin as his brain registers his best friend's voice and responds with happy-drugs. "Just a little tired."

It's a hit to his pride. He's always been the scrawny kid. He's fast, sure. He can outrun just about anything, in short bursts of speed. It's the only reason he's alive today. But he's never had the bulk or muscle definition to sustain intense movement for long - especially something like this, using muscle groups he doesn't usually use, in ways he doesn't think he's ever had to move before. He's a sprinter, not a marathoner. Stamina isn't his highest stat, and he hates being reminded of it now, when he's already naked and vulnerable in every possible way.

"Wanna move?" Mike says without missing a beat. "I can take over."

Will wants to say, *No, that's okay, I can do this*, but the offer is too tempting to turn down.

So they break apart, regretfully, and as Mike gets more lube Will decides to do what he thought they'd be doing in the first place, how he's always imagined it. He turns over and lowers himself onto knees and elbows, feeling a little silly and more than a little vulnerable and exposed until Mike makes a broken sound and folds over him like a living blanket, bracketing him in, leaning down to kiss the knobby back of his neck - and Will has to close his eyes and breathe hard for a moment, caught between an expectant shiver and the wide-eyed impulse to squirm, because this is how *animals* fuck, hunched over each other like this. And then Mike hooks one leg around Will's for leverage and pushes in again, and just like that Will couldn't care less if he looks silly.

Mike moves experimentally, adjusting his own stance a couple times as he tests out how to move. Using his hips, rocking his body forward from the knees, nuzzling his head against Will's as he curls over Will's back like a second skin. He's slow and deliberate, even when he starts to find a rhythm, allowing Will to unwind bit by bit, melting into it with deep breaths in and out, rolling his hips a little to meet Mike's thrusts. The discomfort is still there, and the strange urges to *move*, but there's something else now. The little wisps of pleasure are beginning to solidify, no longer just suggestions but *sensation*. It felt *good* before, in a raw, undefinable kind of way. Now he's starting to feel real *pleasure*. And he wants to chase it.

"How you doing?" Mike pants, voice taut and breathless, and Will exhales a smile.

"I suppose I'll survive," he quips, but Mike slows and adjusts himself again to bonk his forehead against the side of Will's head.

"Wanna slow down? Or stop? We can stop, it's okay, I really don't -"

"No - Mike, I was joking. I'm sorry. I was just joking, I'm okay. I'm great. I don't wanna stop."

Somehow, having a conversation in this position is far more awkward than actually doing the deed, especially with Mike's cock still hot and pulsing inside him, making him want to wriggle or thrust back to begin the friction again.

Mike shifts his weight onto one hand, using the other to reach up and tuck Will's bangs back, out of his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Will twists, making his spine pop in two places, and cranes his neck to offer a kiss. Mike takes it. "I don't wanna stop."

"Does it hurt?"

"No," Will fibs, and then feels a little bad for lying and amends, "Not really. Just weird. I'm getting used to it."

"Are you *sure*?"

“Mike,” Will laughs, rolling his eyes at the same time that he shudders at the bizarre sensation of laughing with something inside of him. “You’re killing me. Are we gonna have sex, or...?”

In a red-faced moment of boldness, he wiggles his hips, pushing himself back against Mike and making Mike groan and give a sharp, automatic little thrust. Will grunts at the sensation.

“Fine, I *guess*,” Mike quips back, and finally - *finally* they start moving again.

And maybe Will had some time to relax and adjust during that conversation, because when they start finding their rhythm again it’s a little easier. Easy enough that he’s able to close his eyes and drift away with it, moving with it, getting more and more used to it. Will barely notices the intensity rising until they’re already deep into a new rhythm, rocking together firmly but languidly.

And he doesn’t think either of them are consciously aware of speeding up until at some point they open their eyes and find themselves jolting with the force of it.

Will is vaguely surprised to find himself gasping as Mike ruts against him, the snap of his hips hard and animalistic. And Mike warned him this might hurt, he said it might pinch or bruise something deep inside of him, but Will doesn’t know how this could possibly hurt when it feels so *good*.

Well, scratch that, it does hurt. There’s a kind of burn, skin stretched too far and too soon, his body caught in a confused tug-o-war between the urge to clench and pull away and reject the foreign object, and the far more potent, undeniable urge to push back, his whole body rocking in a sharp, hiccupping rhythm as he braces his palms on the ground in front of him and shoves himself back to meet Mike’s thrusts. He’s been letting out a long, continuous, stuttering groan, he realizes. Involuntary and guttural. Like the automatic, wrenching cry of pain when you stub your toe or get socked in the gut; he doesn’t make the sounds so much as they simply come from him, without his help, dredged up from the base of his spine. There’s too much sensation in his body, too many impulses. The pleasure and compulsions and *need* within him overflow, and they come out as

sounds, throaty and half-subconscious. Wordless, sometimes, just round vowels and fricatives. Other times, fragments of thoughts and phrases make it out -

“Mike, fuck, *Mike*, I can’t, hnnngod, that’s, don’t stop, don’t stop don’t stop -”

And he’s answered by Mike, breathing directly into Will’s ear, breathless and husky. “Will, Will. F-f-fucking *christ*. You feel so - *ugh*, Will - you feel so *good*. ”

He’s not in control of himself anymore, he’s just along for the ride as the soft animal of his body falls back on millions of years of instinct and fervently, ecstatically, mindlessly fucks his mate. As simple and basic as guzzling water after a hot day of thirst. As easy as muscle memory, and as difficult as navigating a complicated waltz that no one ever taught him. He knows what to do and he doesn’t, it’s automatic and natural and baffling and messy and *wonderful*, and he thinks his eyes might be rolling back in his head as he forgets to be self-conscious about his inexperienced clumsiness. The gentle burn is like the burn of wine in his throat, bracing, warming him. The deep, tight feeling of bruising, it’s there like Mike said. But he can’t feel it as pain, not right now.

He registers, in some far corner of himself, that there is pain there, as his body struggles to accommodate this with so little prior experience. Maybe he’ll feel it later. Maybe he’ll wake up tomorrow, wincing, deliciously sore, moving gingerly but grinning like that cat that got the mouse. But for now, that stretch, that pinch deep inside him is just another part of the pleasure. It’s not as sweet as he’s used to, not like jerking off, but it’s infinitely more satisfying. It at once awakens and satiates a craving he didn’t know he had.

He wonders, distantly, if that craving will be appeased at the end of this and only reawaken if, *when* they do this again. Will that gnawing, desperate hunger abate and disappear once they collapse here, sweaty and panting on the carpet, not to be seen again until the next time they’re writhing together like this? Or will it follow him? Now that he’s had a taste, will he find himself squirming out of his seat at odd hours of the day, flushed and sweating under his clothes with the desire to feel Mike *inside* him again?

“Fuck me,” Will breathes before he quite knows what he’s saying.
“Mike, fuck me, fuck me.”

Mike gives a sort of hoarse sob, and then he’s bearing down harder, resting heavily against Will’s back for a moment before hooking an arm around Will’s chest and pulling him up, making him gasp. Mike slips free as he shuffles them forward to the wall, all graceless enthusiasm and quick wet kisses, and Will shudders as he feels his muscles clench and wink around nothing. He braces his forearms on the wall, thankful for the stability and leverage as Mike fumbles into place behind him, moaning openly as they rejoin and pressing kisses everywhere he can reach, craning his neck to press their cheeks together as they begin to move.

“Fuck me,” Will whispers again, aching, thighs trembling, and Mike does.

Hurt me, Will doesn’t say. I like the pain. I want to limp a little to breakfast tomorrow. I want that reminder that this was real, that it happened, that we were briefly one creature.

Will can feel Mike full-body trembling behind him, his skin hot as flame where it presses against Will’s neck-to-knees, and he *knows* Mike is fighting hard not to come. At this angle, Mike’s shallower, sloppier movements are suddenly stroking against the sensitive, horrible-wonderful cluster of nerves at the front of Will’s walls with every eager thrust, and Will feels his mouth drop open. He’s making noises again, not guttural this time but keening, whimpering, and he registers foggily that he’s not even embarrassed about it. His head drops, neck losing structural integrity all at once as he tilts his hips and arches his back, trying to angle himself so Mike hits it more directly, and *oh there we go, that’s it, that’s, fuckfuckfuck oh fuck that’s - that’s - I’m -*

He doesn’t even get to voice his warning aloud, as laser-focused as he is on straining back against the relentless prod of Mike’s cock, bucking into nothing, when Mike suddenly grinds out, “Will, Will, Will. *Hah*, fuck.” He kisses and then bites the skin behind Will’s ear, then rasps into his hair, “I can’t - for much longer, I - are you -?”

Will nods, unable to do anything else, and then Mike uses one of his

hands to seek out Will's painfully throbbing dick and starts stroking, and Will snaps his head back, open-mouthed, trembling hard as he hurdles the last three, four, five blissful heartbeats to crescendo before it hits.

It's different than usual. More like the few times he's fingered himself while he jerks off, but far deeper, far more powerful. The pleasure isn't centered only on his dick, but seemingly the whole lower quarter of his abdomen, vibrating through him, radiating out from where Mike is still digging into him, thoughtlessly humping as he finally falls over the edge for himself with a choked groan.

He registers, somewhere in the back of his mind, that the movie is still playing. God, how can the movie still be playing? Hasn't it been hours since they sat down in front of the TV?

As Will comes down, twitching and out of breath, he glances down to see that Mike had apparently cupped his hand around the head of Will's dick when he came, catching the burst of liquid in his palm. He's halfway thinking, *oh, good, now we won't have to clean it off the wall or someth-* when Mike lifts his glistening fingers to his own mouth and swipes his tongue over them, making Will's mouth drop open in shock.

"Mike!" he cries, laughing in horror - and at himself, since apparently he's so much more scandalized about *that* than he was about getting literally fucked in the ass, like every cruel thing that's ever been shouted at him across a street or school hallway.

"What?" Mike says, shifting a little to pull Will tighter to him. He sounds a little out of it, like he's half in a dream. "I wanted to see what you taste like."

Is it different than Emmett? Will thinks without meaning to, and then brushes that thought away just as quickly. Emmett's not here, and it doesn't matter anyway. Especially because his next thought is, *I wanna see what you taste like*. Next time, he decides - and then fervently hopes that there is a next time, that this wasn't just a fluke borne out of wine-fueled confessions and whatever love-drugs they poison the air with on Valentine's Day.

Mike has to pull free to discard the condom, and Will tenses up at the feeling of throbbing emptiness. He had forgotten entirely to worry about Mike getting any, ah, *substances* on his dick, and now he remembers that particular concern and pointedly does *not* look at the limp piece of rubber to find out.

When Mike returns, Will has flopped down on the sleeping bag, sticky and sore and trying to catch his breath. He holds out an arm, and Mike wastes no time in flopping down next to him and pulling part of the sleeping bag over them for warmth. They catch their breath together, shivering a little as sweat - and other liquids - cool and dry.

Mike frowns at the TV screen, lifting his face from Will's hair with a little sniff. The actors onscreen are screaming and yelling about something, but Will hasn't caught a single hint of the plot since they first kissed.

"What's happening?"

Will snorts, and then laughs. "I have no idea."

Mike is, honestly, exhausted.

Intentionally so. He was using every trick in the book, everything he knew to wind Will up higher. Totally focused on making it as good for him as he could - because this is *Will*, and Mike was going to make it good for him if it killed him. Even though it meant fighting like *hell* to hold his orgasm off for what felt like hours. Even though he could have come the second Will said the words, *fuck me*. He *wanted* to come then. It took all his stamina and strength of mind - and body - not to.

Not to mention he was completely unprepared for how good Will would feel. He was tighter and hotter than anything Mike has experienced, even a mouth.

But, speaking of -

"Did I hurt you?"

He lifts his head, suddenly very concerned that Will was *too* tight, and Will turns over and kisses him dreamily.

“Mm-hmm,” he hums.

Mike’s insides freeze. “Shit, Will, I’m sorry, I thought - damnit, I knew we should have slowed down. Why didn’t you say something?”

But Will is shaking his head. “Just a little. It was good. Hey. *Hey*.” He grabs Mike’s face, forcing him to pay attention and stop freaking out. “I’m okay, Mike. I’m fine. It was *good*, I -” He bites his lip and his eyes drift down, sheepish, and then he leans in to mumble through a kiss, “I like a little pain. Okay? I liked it. A lot.”

But Mike can’t just accept that. He’s still looking Will over, trying to see his eyes and rubbing his limbs as he says, “But does it feel like anything tore? Did we use enough lube? Was it like a sharp pain all at once or -”

He’s checking them both over for blood, reaching down to gently probe, simmering with concern. Will jumps in surprise at the feeling of Mike carefully sinking a finger into him again, going red as if they didn’t just fuck on the ground with no prep, raw and messy.

“No, no. Nothing like that. Just kind of a pinch like you said.” He squirms away from Mike’s finger, still blushing, and Mike retreats. “I could use a washcloth or something though.”

“Yeah. Sure thing.”

Mike extracts himself from the warmth of the sleeping bag. They should probably just toss that straight into the washer.

Too bad, really. They’ll just have to share one tonight. Nothing else for it.

“You want a shower?”

Will groans, stretching his arms over his head, and sends Mike a little smile. “Depends if you’re in it.”

This, somehow, catches Mike entirely off guard, and he twists his

head away with a flustered grin. This is gonna take some getting used to. “What, like when we took baths together when we were little?”

“Shower. Not bath. I’d, uh.” Will clears his throat as he stands. “I’d rather not sit on a hard surface right now if it could be avoided.”

Mike fights down a giggle. “Right. Sure. Shower it is.”

He starts heading for the stairs, but Will glances at their clothes, which are mostly still scattered over the couch. “We’re gonna walk through the house naked?”

“You really wanna put on clothes right now?”

And Will grimaces - most likely, like Mike, considering the tacky dampness of drying lube on his dick and on his lower stomach and between his asscheeks and dripping down his thighs, and the tender ache developing between his legs somewhere in the pit of him, and his sweat-damp skin, and imagining trying to wear clothes over that, even briefly.

His nose wrinkles. “Yeah... maybe not.”

Mike scoops up the unzipped sleeping bag, offering it as a sort of two-person cloak. Will clicks off the VCR as they pass by, and they lean on each other as they climb the stairs.

Mike is wrapped up in the sleeping bag, sitting on the lid of the toilet as Will starts the water. Tonight doesn’t feel real. This feels like a dream, like a pocket dimension, like he’ll wake up tomorrow and realize none of it happened.

But when he says, “Still wanna date?”, Will kisses him, pulls him into the shower, and says, “Yup.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I'd say this felt rushed, except that it's literally over 10K words and I debated splitting it into 2 but then that would be yet **another** chapter.

Aaaaaand I'm pretty sure there's gonna be a little epilogue just to tie up some loose threads. So.

Anywho, omfg we made it! That only took literal years, lol. As always, PLEASE let me know any and all thoughts, esp if you're still here after THAT monster of a chapter. I also literally haven't edited and won't be until tomorrow, because I am Done (TM) looking at a computer.

Thank you so much for reading! I can't believe what a journey this particular fic has been :D